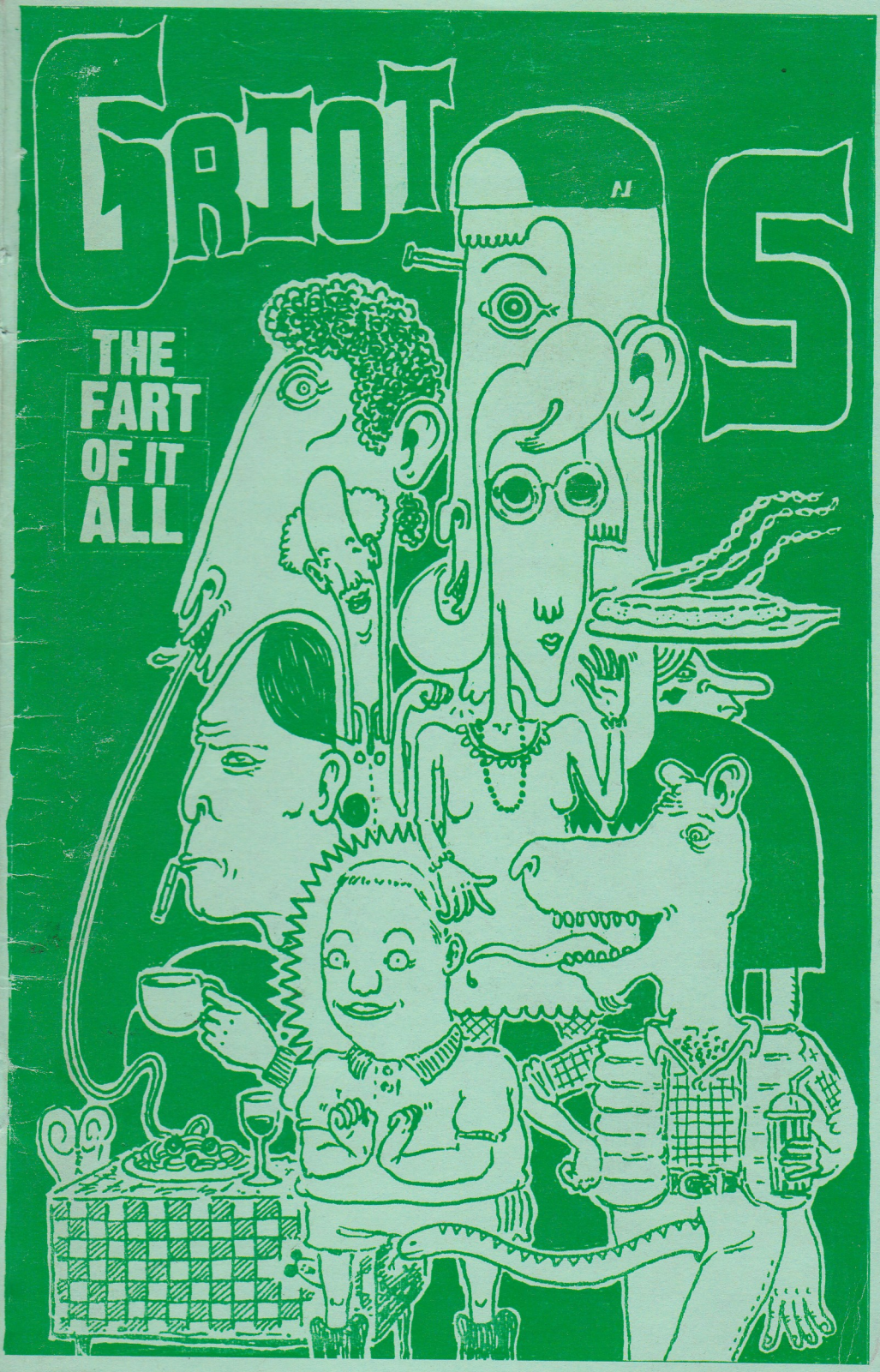
GRIOT

THE FART OF IT ALL



ALL NUDE BREAK OUR SHIT PARTY

C.S.B.Y.S.



FETURING:

WELCOME TO CONCRETE

BETTER THAN DEFIANCE OHIO OR MASAKARI

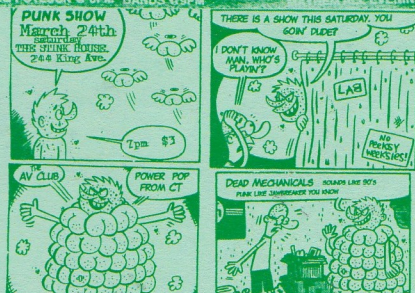
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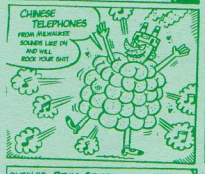
DISASTER

PROFESSORS FROM THE DEPT. OF HARDCORE OF PUNK-IT-X UNIVERSITY (PKU)

THE NEW 15TH HOUSE (376 E. 14TH AVE.)

BO POTLUCK @ 6PM BANDS @8PM









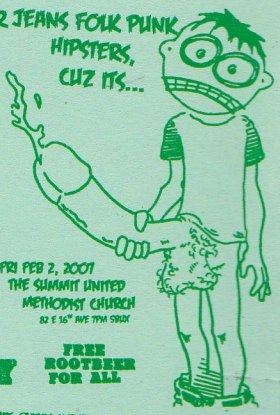






GET READY TO CREAM YOUR JEANS FOLK PUNK HIPSTERS, CUZ ITS...

DEFIANCE OHIO GHOST MICE



FRI FEB 2, 2007
THE SUMMIT UNITED METHODIST CHURCH
82 E 16TH AVE 7PM SHARP

WITH SPECIAL GUESTS

TAIGA & DELAY

FREE ROOTBEER FOR ALL

IF YOU DON'T GET ARRESTED DOWNTOWN WHILE SMASHING THE STATE COME AND SEE...

SATURDAY MARCH 18TH

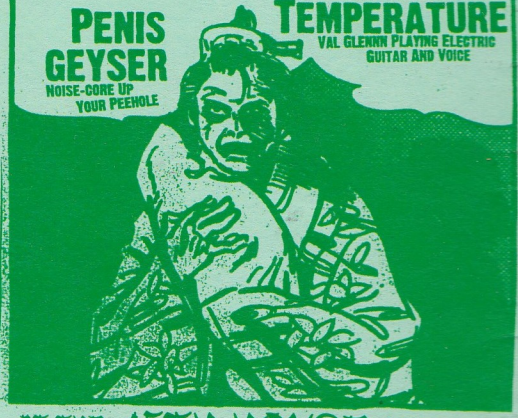
GANGLION MPLS
OMINOUS & SPAZZY PSYCHEDELIC PUNKCORE WITH BLACK METAL VOCALS

HARLEQUIN MPLS
VIOLIN CELLO DRUM COMBO PLAYING METALLIC GOTHIC STRING MUSIC

DRUM DUNGEON
SIX DRUMSET TORTURE UNIT

TIME AND TEMPERATURE
VAL GLENNN PLAYING ELECTRIC GUITAR AND VOICE

PENIS GEYSER
NOISE-CORE UP YOUR PEEHOLE



AT THE 15TH HOUSE 369 E 15TH

NINE PM COLUMBUS OH $5

your invited to...

CHILLI COOK-OFF POTLUC Night

at the RWTC 369 e 15th

THURS MARCH 9th 8pm

come on over to our beautiful house for some grub with your friends. everybody bring your favorite record to listen to or we'll eat your food.

challenge our chili. our residents will collectively judge the chilis and award a prize at the end of the night.



Griot

FIVE

tHE faRT OF it ALL



JanuaRY 20-08

T.F.O.I.A.

In a recent survey conducted by Mental Health America, a non-profit which promotes mental wellness, scientists ranked each state based on the levels of depression of their citizens. Factors determining the rankings included percentages of population members experiencing a major depressive episode, psychological distress and state suicide rates. Opening the pages of the Columbus Dispatch during another lull at work with nothing else worthwhile to read I was informed that Ohio came in at 43rd, seven slots away from most depressed Utah.

Sarah D. explains it all for me the next day outside of the Sunflower Market.

"Did you know that there are more cloudy days per year in Central Ohio than in the Pacific Northwest?" I'm shocked. You never hear Ohioans complain about the unrelenting gloom that is half the year. The lack of Vitamin D resulting in Seasonal Affective Disorders becomes another comfortable routine much like going to the Sunflower Market daily to use all the $5 free coupons from the hundreds of student newspapers we snatched from campus.

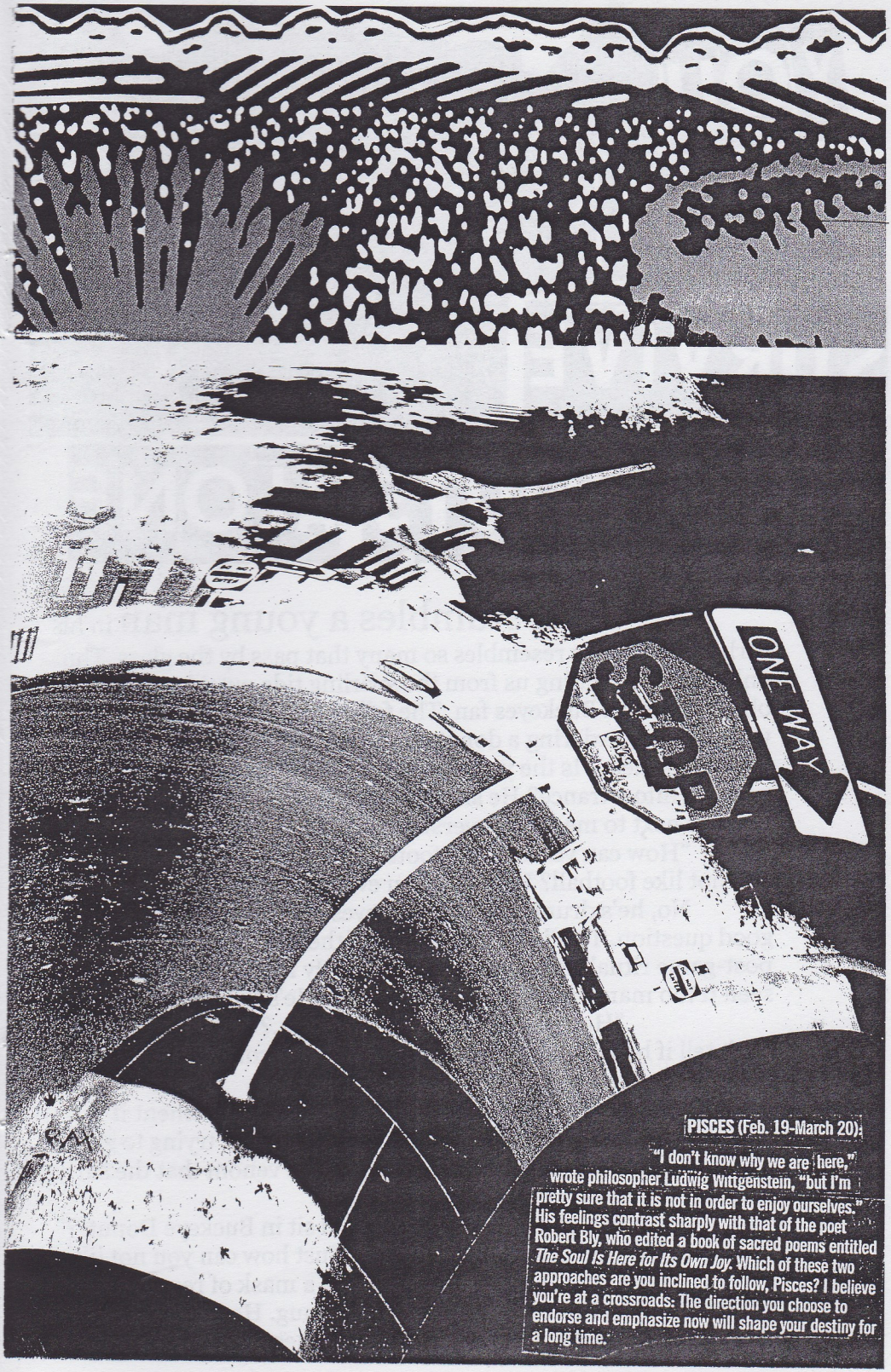
"The reason it seems so unbelievable," Sarah continues, "Is that we hardly even notice the clouds when everything else is going wrong. With all the unemployment, crappy service jobs, underfunded schools, crumbling inner cities, pollution, gridlock, cut state social spending, bad art and even worse sports teams(to name a few) how can this gloom really make anything worse?"

I guess she has a point.

Happiness is fucked. To strive for it, to make it your life's goal, in days like this, is just another El Dorado. It's gonna make things worse. It's time to give up on all that and just start living. There's better things lurking in the gloom than the flightly lover that is happiness. It's all just one big fart.

There's things waiting out there, like a cigarette in the snow, that are more real than happiness. To embrace all the ugliness of the world and still walk away with a crooked smile is greater than any celebrated summer can be. In the grey, the Ohioans will find out what unhappiness really means, the stunning potential.

In the meantime, this is my second installment of stories of Columbus Ohio, a town too good to leave, too bad to really take seriously. The sun can come up another day.



PISCES (Feb. 19–March 20):

"I don't know why we are here," wrote philosopher Ludwig Wittgenstein, "but I'm pretty sure that it is not in order to enjoy ourselves." His feelings contrast sharply with that of the poet Robert Bly, who edited a book of sacred poems entitled *The Soul Is Here for Its Own Joy*. Which of these two approaches are you inclined to follow, Pisces? I believe you're at a crossroads: The direction you choose to endorse and emphasize now will shape your destiny for a long time.

YOU CANT SURVIVE ON DONUTS ALONE



In stumbles a young man in his early twenties. He resembles so many that pass by the glass. The only thing separating us from the swirling tide outside. It's obvious. He's a Buckeyes fan. The fellow sits down at the counter without even ordering a donut or an éclair or even a cup of coffee. He stares ahead. Is the young man sleepwalking? Has the game put him into a trance? He sizes us up, tries to decipher what the patrons next to me are conversing about.

"How can you not like football? If you go to OSU, *how* can you not like football? What are you even doing here?"

No, he's drunk and the Buckeyes have won. But it *is* a good question. This is the beginning of the Saturday bacchanalian post-game ritual that will extend into early Monday morning. I've seen it too many times not to be amused. He's flabbergasted.

"How can you not like football...?" He trails off. I can't tell if he is going to cry or jump over the counter to strangle us until we like football.

"So when did liking football become a requirement if you're a student here?" The grad student to my left trying to grade papers begins but his retort falls short of the venom that the surly chauncy deserves. This is our place.

"How can you not suck cock if you sit in Buckeye Donuts?" I shout at the man full of football lust. "Just how can you not like sucking cock sitting here...?" My visage is a mask of requited confusion. I drink slowly from my coffee mug. He jolts, trying to mouth the syllables of a reply. Nothing comes.

"Wha, huh, what?" His mouth is a sputtering engine. Dysfunction. He is overheating. Perhaps the football fan realizes at this moment all he ever wanted was a quarterback to touch his flexed buttocks at the line of scrimmage. I doubt it.

"Bunch of coffee shop fags!" He bursts from the stool and storms out of Buckeye Donuts, everybody's watching now.

"What the fuck was that?" The grad student turns to me, "I mean.." He begins to chuckle, "I mean that was awesome."

I take a big gulp of my cold coffee. It's not everyday that we win. Outnumbered in this town, especially on days like this, the coffee shop fags have to take direct action sometimes. I've been called this and everything else my whole life, why live it down? Best to just beat them at their own game.

Ohio *is* football country. God mostly hears prayers of touchdowns and pigskin this time of year. In the heart of it all, you can't avoid the craze. It's easy to lose yourself come Saturday afternoon whether you like it or not amidst the sea of scarlet and grey. You can't avoid it. Try to hide indoors but its echoes surround you. For years I was awaken every Saturday 7 a.m. to stereos blasting the brass and tom of the best damn band in the land, the fight songs of the Ohio State marching band. You just have to accept it, no matter how hard that can be for the coffee shop fag. Other states cherish their football traditions come the weekend, but here it is different. We are crazy in a fashion that others can't comprehend. We are nuts, literally, Buckeyes in fact. The whole state, whether you're from Pickaway or Cuyahoga County, gets behind this team. Autumn again in Ohio, the Sabbath comes Saturday and church is a Horseshoe.

The waves of football fans shambling drunk down High Street have passed. It's low tide now. I close my contemporary Japanese fiction novel and throw the rest of my coffee down my throat. I realize now, how typecasted I have let myself become.

I sit on some steps outside to wait for a friend, watching the stragglers go by swept up in the current. "Fuck," muttering under my breath realizing that I am in fact wearing all black today. I must seem as stereotypical as they to me. There is bitterness to my breath and I quietly laugh to myself. I catch the echoes of a conversation lapping at my back.

"I went to the game today and I am *DRUNK*!"

"Oh man!" A female voice warbles violently, there is no need to look at what colors the voices are wearing today, "I went to the game *too,* and I am *DRUUUNK.*"

"Oh my god. Imagine that..." I sigh. They'll never hear the futile sarcasm.

"Ha ha ha, OK, lets go in."

The excess is terrific. More honest than anything I got to offer, it's a reminder of what living in the first world is really about. Pure decadence. Unadulterated, uncut, unconscious. I think Al-Qaeda might have been right all along.

I guess not even the coffee shops are safe anymore. Unfortunately, these things must be accepted. The place is called "Buckeye" Donuts after all. Without all the drunken chauncies engorging themselves on fried dough, even my beloved donut spot probably couldn't stay in business. Old Greek people, punks, role playing gamers and other subalterns can only account for so much business. So let there be a truce. We'll all become gross exaggerations of the clichés we make for one another. I'll start coming in to read my contemporary Japanese fiction after 3 a.m. They'll all be passed out and I'll be comfortably alone at my home away from home. The jihad can wait...for now.

Muslim group decries car dealer's 'jihad' ad

REUTERS

CINCINNATI — A car commercial proclaiming a jihad on the U.S. auto market and offering "Fatwa Fridays" with free swords for the kids is offensive and should not be aired, Muslim leaders said Sunday.

The radio advertisement for the Dennis Mitsubishi car dealership in Columbus, Ohio, has "a whole jihad theme," said Adnan Mirza of the Council on American-Islamic Relations.

"They are planning on launching a jihad on the automotive market and their representatives would be wearing burqas," Mirza said. "They mentioned the pope in there and also about giving rubber swords out to the kiddies — really just reprehensible type comments."

Details of the radio ad, which has not been broadcast, have been reported in the local media, but officials at the dealership declined to comment about the content of the spot. Two employees at the dealership said they had been deluged with calls about the commercial.

"The ad has never been released. It is not out for public listening," said one employee who declined to give his name. He would not say whether the dealership had changed its mind about airing the commercial.

Mirza said that the Council on American-Islamic Relations likely would contact the dealer to "offer some kind of cultural or sensitivity awareness training."

CORRECTIONS

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Geography

Remy and I take the greyhound to Cleveland. We're on our way to paint his mom's bathrooms in exchange for dinner and beers. Waiting for his friend to pick us up at our destination, I notice everyone 's faces at the bus station beaming bright and cheery. It's 11 in the evening.

"Don't you think it's peculiar?" I point for my companion, "Have you ever noticed a greyhound station with so many happy looking people?"

Every one that I'd ever known was not filled with smiles, but bleak annoyance. Especially that one back home. The greyhound station I had spent more time waiting in than any other. Remy smiles. Of course he knows why. *This* is the one was where he had grown up.

"You see, Cleveland is the last stop on this line," He looks around, even the paint job shines friendlier. "No one here is waiting six hours on their transfer, all pissed off and wanting their ride to be over. They're reuniting with their families and friends when they get to this point or they're eager to set of on their journey." My friend is perceptive. I wish I had been wise enough to realize this. "Columbus on the other hand, is a point where the east-west and the north-south routes intersect. It's a major transfer point in the Midwest. Of course they all look depressed, they want to get the fuck out and get on with their lives."

My mind is somewhere else. I hardly notice Remy has just summed up my entire life in a metaphor about a bus station.

Is Cleveland the proverbial pot of gold at the end of the Greyhound Lines rainbow? Not at all. Outside the station, this city on the lake is the dump it always has been. My painting partner isn't saying we all need to move here. It's just his secret way of informing me places have secret meanings in the timing that we come to inhabit them. Just smelling the sweet poetry hanging in the air while we wait. It rivals even the stench that emanated from the on-board toilet of our bus that barreled away hours ago from this discussed vector of wayfarer sadness.

Columbus is a home that neither of us chose. A place I guess I have to call home now. It is just another part of this story

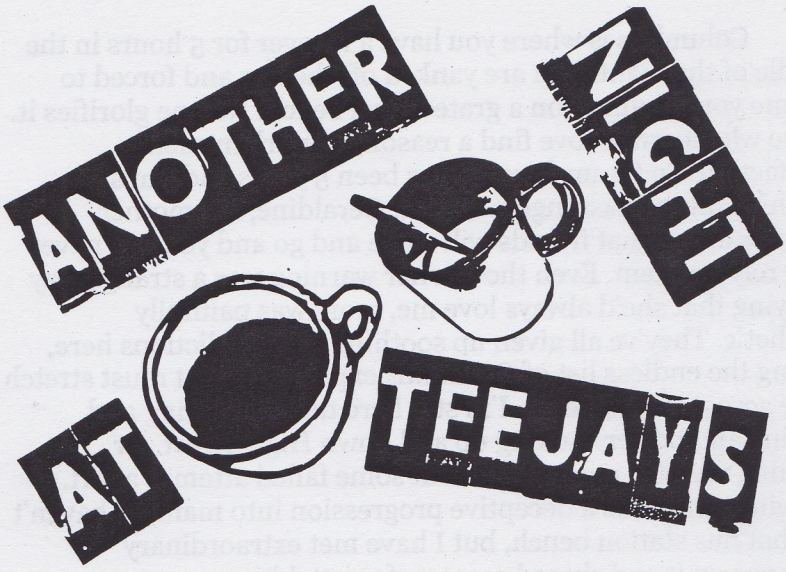
revolving around the town lying at the intersecting point of I-71 and I-70. Where two major interstates link the east to the west and the north to the south, our town is the crossroads. It's even on the historic national road that originally linked the country together in its infancy. Now a minor highway called SR-40, you could walk from coast to coast like the land hungry white immigrants once had. I don't think its legacy has passed. If that's not the way you want to go, there is always High Street, which you probably walk down everyday at least once. If you kept walking on its shoulder out of city limits it will take you to the Gulf of Mexico. Just a few steps away lies the North Market. The old public market now yuppie food court, at a crossing of its own within this city of crossroads. It's where I'm currently employed, unable to escape when not doing favors for the weekend.

If geography determines a location's character then what is it that is in the minds of those who call it their own? For the concrete I found myself living on for the last half decade, I couldn't have crafted a more perfect metaphor. Remy's ironic observations couldn't be more true. Just like the greyhound riders waiting at the station on Town Street, clutching their tickets at four in the morning, cursing the Hound and wishing they were at their destination, most people I know here are clutching whatever they hold most dear, cursing this town and wishing they were somewhere else. Transition. Frustration. Resignation. It's a good place to reinvent ones' self, over and over again. The word on peoples' mind is *when*. Young folks from all the small town scattered across Ohio come to this crossroads to experience for themselves the "big city". It's hardly, but to an 18 year old from Zanesville or Massillon or Yellow Springs, it'll do. They come here to go to the nation's largest state university. They come here to get jobs. To see what rock and roll is really is about. To waste away. To fall in love. To find addictions. To find the *one*. To beat addictions. To run away. To come back home over and over again. To make it as a big fish in a little pond. To let their everything crash down upon their heads and start bands with names like "Dismal". When they don't find their dreams here, which usually involves half a lifetime's amount of student loans or a new found bleakness resembling the wintry sky over some forgotten soybean field, they pack up and look for a new addictions in places where people put the word "fuckin" in between the city and state name on Myspace. Not here though. It's really all inconsequential and that's a reason to love it.

Columbus is where you have a layover for 5 hours in the middle of the night. You are yanked off the bus and forced to resume your slumber on a grated steel bench. No one glorifies it. Those who learn to love find a reason to smirk in silent satisfaction. So far my layover has been 5 years and I'm still watching all the passengers depart. Geraldine, my mother, always warned that friends will come and go and you can never truly rely on them. Even though her warning was a strange way of saying that she'd always love me, mom was painfully prophetic. They've all given up soothing their addictions here, joining the endless list of Columbus expatriates that must stretch twice across the universe. I'm still here though, yelling and spitting and power walking up and down High Street. Or crashing my bike over and over at some failed attempt at art. Growing up here is a deceptive progression into mania. I haven't left that bus station bench, but I have met extraordinary personas on it and shared some unforgettable moments. Conversations that I cant explain the meaning. More of a choose your own adventure or true crime novel than mere exchanges of words. I'm still dancing at these crossroads. So close to where I-70 and I-71 meet and within sight of the national road. I hope on never being disappointed again. I've given up on the search for perfection and settled on everything for it to be. That's all anyone gets.

This is about when I decided to stop making friends. Unfortunately it didn't work. When I get back from that trip with Remy, that focal point of the strange gravity pulls me even closer to the crossroads, the heart of the heart of it all. I move 10 blocks to the south. All that much closer to where I-71 and I-70 meet, into an uninsulated attic where I write this for you.





I get out of work at **nine** from the library and I ain't got shit to do. I cross the street and wait for the number two to take me away. It's never a long wait and when it comes I don't care where I go. Anywhere but home. I flash my student ID and climb aboard. Taking a seat at the back of the bus I stare out at High Street. The college students flash by and I hate them all. I am one of them. I look at my face in the reflection of the glass pane that separates us. It gives me no piece of mind.

Almost a year in and I've yet to find my niche. I have no friends but that will change soon. But for now I don't know what I'm doing with myself so I'm riding the number two to the end of the line. Maybe I'll find something there. Not fifteen minutes later the driver pulls into a strip mall in Worthington.

"Alright, everyone, this is it. Were turning this thing around." She unceremoniously announces, parking in front of the discount store. I thought she was going to take me somewhere new. The last thing I want to do is step off onto concrete.

I dismount into the parking lot. It's somewhere that could be anywhere. Another of the middle class's shopping destinations. I look around. It seems like every step I take is just another one of the same leading me nowhere but closer to my own solitude. Across the street is some kind of chain restaurant. "24 hours," the sign proclaims in incandescent yellow and red. "The country place." Why not? What else have I to do? I jangle the change in my pocket and cross the street.

After nearly five hours of reading Bakunin's God and the State, I've had my fill of revolutionary anarchism by the deed and bottomless coffee. Wired out of my mind, I should leave. I don't know where but if I don't now I might just float away. Paying my $1.45 at the counter I notice the only other two customers, a pair of friends, young women in earth tones, getting up to leave as well. I swear they were making fun of me in whispered voices the whole time from across the room.

Hitting the night air, it almost feels better. I'm not floating away. I halt my direction to look up at the sky. Barely a star can be seen down here. Behind me a female voice calls out.

"Hey you...HEY!"

I turn around. The two girls are standing there. The ones that were making fun of me.

"What are you doing?" The taller one with long brown hair questions.

"Uh....nothing?" I stammer.

"Well, me and my friend, Jessica, saw you in there and thought you looked interesting. We want to know if you want to come have an adventure with us." She continues, smiling plainly.

What can anyone respond to this with besides "OK!"

"Ok!" I shrug, "I ain't got shit to do. What do ya have in mind?"

"We don't know" She turns to look to her companion. "Do you know any places to break into?"

"Ha." I exclaim, "Yeah, I know just the place." Just that week I was introduced to Fort Hayes.

"Well come on then." The other one says Pointing to a white Toyota.

"I can't see why not." I smile. " I smile.

"Well then, Let's go. You got a name?"

When you're at your wits' end, sometimes life gives what you need. Is it God? Karma? Some sort of omnipresent metaphysical energy that doles out aid when it's needed most? I don't know and I don't care. All I know is that you are given chances and you ought to go with them. Never say no is my motto and it hasn't fucked me up too bad yet. Things like these are the spice of life and I'll take the hottest it has to offer

The one with long brown hair is Sarah. Her companion, who happens to have shorter hair, is Jessica. They are best mates and both students at Columbus State. I direct them with the best of my knowledge to the abandoned army barracks just north of

downtown. We get lost once, me never knowing where to go. I never drive in the city, being an ardent pedestrian, but we make it and pull into the weed infested lot.

It is an ominous scene. Red brick dormitories from the turn of the century rising out of a field returned to native prairie. Both have lived all their lives here and have no clue Fort Hayes exists. We lock the doors and make a path to a dilapidated structure that once was an institution for teaching the young men of Ohio how to be effective and obedient killers. Pushing the rust-laden hinges, the sturdy door reveals an empty carcass of a room. Gutted, white walled are covered in bad teenage graffiti. It's spooky but a nice solace from the outside world of business as usual and keeping up appearances for the consumers. It's also a refuge, wrappers and empty coke bottles line the alley and stairways as we climb further into the structure.

Fort Hayes, left unguarded for wayward youth in search of trouble and bums looking for a place to rest, was once a major military institution. Established in 1861 precipitating the outbreak of the Civil War, the land, originally 71 acres went for $16,000. Officially purchased in 1863 from Robert Neil, whom Neil Avenue is named after, an abolitionist farmer, his lands also went on to be the home of Ohio State University. At that time the military encampment was a mile outside of the capital of Ohio, population 19,000. First called the Columbus barracks, then the Columbus Arsenal it was finally renamed in 1922 after the Ohio Governor turned President Rutherford B. Hayes. It was a major recruiting center for Central Ohio's young men starting during WWII. During Vietnam it produced 151-200 recruits a day. Today Fort Hayes is a ghost of its past. The Army Reserve facilities were moved to a new complex in 1994 to Yearling Road in Whitehall. It was cheaper to build a better, more energy efficient Reserve Center than modify these fifty year old buildings. Some have been utilized as a local alternative High School for the arts, a bus depot and adult education facilities. Others lay dormant like the three left we came seeking. We are not the only ghosts that stalk these halls. Rumors abound that the first structure built in the 1860s, the Shot Tower, is haunted by a man who was killed by a cannon explosion during the ceremonial firing as Lincoln's body entered Columbus on its railroad tour of the country after his assassination. The 9.7 acres in which the hollow remnants now stand are valued by the Franklin County Auditor at $13.5 million. It's now in the heart of prime Columbus urban redevelopment.

At every corner Jessica and Sarah falsestart with fright.

"What are you two doing?" I laugh. Trying to seem stoic, upholding my gender role. I am kinda afraid too.

"There's probably people in here, right?" Jessica murmurs.

"No there isn't."

"What are we gonna do when they find us?' She scratches her head.

"We'll kill them."

Exploring the second floor, the conditions are more death defying and the rudimentary spray painted penises more infrequent. I notice that one of the school rooms is shut tight to the left. A cord is tied around the door knob with a knot, its length shut in the door. Some kind of home bum security system. I point it out to my new friends,

"I think you were right." I declare.

"Yeah, this is too much. Let's get out of here," Jessica exclaims.

Not wanting to interrupt anyone's sleep behind the door with our bored search for adventure I follow in silent agreement.

Back outside they tell me to sit down with them in the grass. In the south hovers the noveau Columbus skyline. Jessica pulls out a notebook from her satchel and snaps her fingers.

"Okay there is something that you need to do for me." She flips the pages. "Whenever I meet someone new I make them take my survey. So, are you ready?"

I stifle a confused look. I don't have a choice. She reads off a list of various pop culture items in which I have to respond whether I like them or not. Sarah lights a cigarette and observes with amusement and pity.

"Alanis Morisette."

"No."

"Clockwork Orange, the movie."

"Yes."

"That movie is sexist you know, I can't stand it."

"True, but the movie, though good, was a misrepresentation of the book. Have you read it?

"No. Next, Black Sabbath.

"YES!"

"Wrong."

"What?"

"Zen and the Art of Motorcycle Maintenance."

"Never read it...but probably not."

It's a series of questions that never fails to determine whether they can be my friend or not. It continues and I do my honest best. After five minutes of queries and discussion she closes her notebook. Shaking her head,

"It looks like you're answers didn't correspond once to the

right ones of the survey."

"Sorry," I respond, "Looks like we can't be friends..."

She just smiles. But seriously, how could I ever be friends with someone who didn't like Black Sabbath?

Outside my duplex I motion for Jessica to stop.

"Here it is." I wave at the white piece of shit with vinyl siding I call home.

"Well were going to a party at our friends' house now. I don't know if you want to go, but you're invited. It's in Gahanna."

I ponder the offer for the existence that lies within a second and shake my head.

"I don't know. I'm sorry. I have to work tomorrow morning and I'd have no way to get back in time." I shift my weight grabbing my bookbag. "It was nice meeting you two and having an adventure though. I enjoyed it."

"Well do you want our phone numbers then?" Jessica looking back at me.

When events like what had just occur, they are pure in their total serendipity. Out of context or anything beyond it, they lose all of their magic. I ponder the offer for another second.

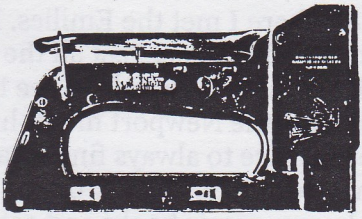
"Naw, I don't think so. It just wouldn't be the same." I could never explain. I just get out and shut the door.

It could have been a love of a lifetime. It could have been an orgy or murder in the morning news for that matter. But it wasn't. It just wasn't in the stars or in their survey either. I'm sure they thought I was a jerk. For some reason I'm not living up to my "never say no" philosophy and I regret it when I hear their car sputter off.

These days I'm accused of being an aging Columbus scenester. At 24, it seems a little premature, but it wasn't always so. Too many friends and not enough revolutionary anarchist literature in my life these days. I once was new in the city with not shit to do. It leads you into interesting directions. Now I'm just "old" with not shit to do.







ON HIGH STREET AGAIN

I'm on High Street again, putting up fliers like I always do. It's what I do even if defying the non-posting ordinance will fail to bring anyone new out. Lanski trudges up behind me in front of the Wexner Center, a skateboarders' dreamland and home of free contemporary art for the masses.

"Whoa dude, what's up? Lemme get one of those," he warbles enthusiastically. So I give him one and he nods. "This show is going to be awesome, can I get another one?" It's what he would say. Like every other day on High Street. Lanski is my number one booster. If I'm Chuck D, he'd be my Flava Flav. He always knows someone uninitiated to tell about the next concert in my basement. I show my affection by bestowing upon him the worst nicknames I can conjure.

"Hey do you know about those people in town interviewing people in front of the State House for an audio documentary on NPR? They're just down there, walking the other way. I just talked to them. You should give them one of your flyers. You could still catch them. Better yet, you should tell them one of your stories."

"Okay, Duchess. I'll do that." Conversing with Big Slam is like conversing with a train wreck. You're bombarded mercilessly but every once in awhile there's something quite valuable laid strewn about.

"Well, I guess I should go do that, huh?" I begin to turn, running. "Catch ya later Samuel Chompers!"

"Ah, fuck you, you asshole. Why do you call me all those horrible..."

I don't have time to reply. I scurry across traffic and foot it south. Past where Long's Bookstore was before they sold out to Barnes & Nobles. Past where Beekman's Bagels used to be before he threw in the towel. Now it's a Christian chicken chain. Past the other bookstore where I never paid for college texts but they paid

me. Past the benches where I met the Emilies. Past where I bought cigarettes for the first time. Past all the Juggalos in clown-face camped out on the sidewalk to see their fucked up Faygo-drinking heroes at the Newport music hall. Past where Insomnia used to be, a place to always find a game of Vampire the Masquerade to join, sleep all day or buy drugs. In front of where you can still buy old porn, comic books and get free movie passes. I finally track them down.

How did I know who they were? Simple, they looked like they listened to NPR.

"You're the folks that are recording people tell stories of their cities across the country out of the air stream trailer for NPR, right?" I gasp, exhausted.

"Yeah that's us," says the young woman, amused. "And the recordings will be archived in the Library of Congress as well."

"I wanted to give you this. Perhaps you'd be interested while you're in town." I hand them the yellow photocopy with Monday's date on it. The man takes it from my hand and scrutinizes the image and words.

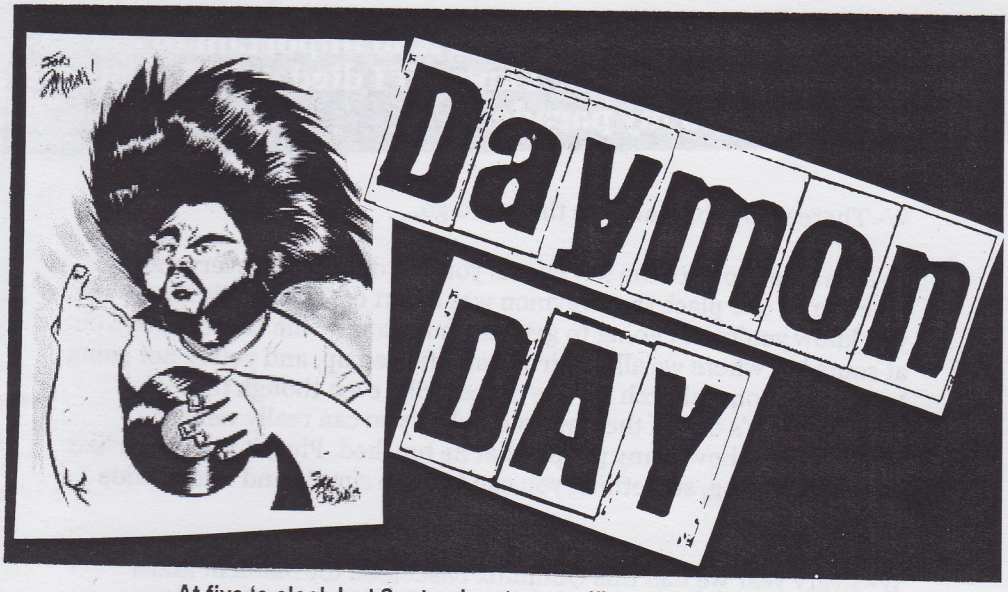
"Where did you take this artwork from?" his eyes awaken suddenly. I note his reaction.

"From a coffee table book, about the men who stay in efficiency hotels, flophouses, and their lives in New York City." The young man gives a chuckle and his field recording partner looks at him.

"I took all those photos for that book. Imagine that!"

Ah, the sweet poetry of life. It's not unheard of to find it on High Street.Every city block has a story of its own.I never make it down to the State House and they never come to our house show.





At five 'o clock last September 15th, traffic on High Street came to a dead halt. Did the Buckeyes beat Michigan again? It was another football Saturday in Columbus, but this was not the reason. An unsuspecting assortment of people filled the blocks holding banners and chanting "Long live Racist Joe!" What the hell was going on? Many people wondered this stuck in traffic but never found out. Usually the passing of important politicians or community leaders warrant such a display of public affection.

Racist Joe, formally known as Daymon Dodson, was neither but probably better, or if anything, more loved. A friend to many and someone you'd recognize even if you never actually knew him, he died suddenly at the age of 29 of a seizure, leaving a giant-sized impression on those who did.

Who exactly was Racist Joe? I sat down with the organizers of the Daymon Day parade that took High Street by force to find out more about this individual touted as the patron saint of Columbus indie culture and the parade thrown in his honor.

Introduce yourselves and tell me one thing that people know you for in Columbus.

T- My name is Tony Collinger. I perform under the name of Envelope.

P- I'm Paul Loveman. My DJ name is DJ Greenspin and I run the site Omnimix and you've probably seen me filming at shows. I do a lot of videotaping.

W- My name is Wesley Eckmeyer, but I go by the name Wes Flexner. I used to vandalize other people's property.

Who was Daymon and why was it so important to have a parade named after him? I know if I died only five people would show up to my parade.

W- There would probably be thirty. I'd go.

T- A parade is one of the few events you can do to bring everyone together in one place that Daymon was a part of. There's his family and you know you're not going to get his whole family, the church group out at some bar where we all get drunk and fucked up, and you're not going to get us at some church service necessarily, even though there is exceptions. It's one of the few times when you can really visualize, physically see how many people that he touched. Plus, it was kinda like an original thing, something you can keep so simple and that's kinda gaudy.

W- Every year we had this Omnimix basketball tournament and a graffiti wall in Tuttle Park. There would always be an after party so we had already started planning to do this. This was something that Daymon was at every year. Everyone in Columbus hip hop, graffiti and punk rock kids would show up every year. Damon passed so we started discussing of having a "Daymon Day". Then Tony was like, " We can have a parade permit" and I was like "You're crazy, but go for it." So we were talking about having this Daymon Day. We already have Tuttle Park, we already have the High Five. We already have two places and then Tony was like "Why don't we have a parade from Tuttle Park to the High Five." That's nuts, but he is a bike messenger so he deals with a lot of law firms and knows how things work. He has an understanding of how the city works. He gets the permit for the graffiti wall in Tuttle Park. Tony says were gonna have a parade, that would be great, in my head I was think he's nuts. A week later, "We're gonna have a parade, Sept. 15th." Ok, were gonna have a parade! And then we do it!"

Damon was so loved, he passed August 16th and his funeral was Thursday, a week later. His funeral was at the Arena Christian Center. Which is huge, bigger than the Newport. It's like Promo West but with crosses. If you saw it on television you would fear it. You would be like "Oh my god." You would hate it.

T- It's like the Wizard of Oz's house.

W- So his funeral happened and it was seriously, I don't know a better term, but sold out. People couldn't get in. The place held a 1,000 people, and people couldn't get in. They had other rooms with closed circuit cameras showing the funeral. It was stacked. It was like if you took everyone in Columbus that liked one band. Say Minor Threat decided to have a reunion show and sold out at Promo West(huge concert venue). Everybody you know that was involved with any Columbus music scene, art scene and then 600 Christians you have never seen before who knew him twice as long as we have. These two groups of people meeting each other. These people who knew Daymon

from the church were just discovering that all these other people he had touched. And we were like he was really big in the church.

T- He understood things so much greater than we did and so much greater than they did. He could be both. He could understand Gism[1] and he could understand... Jesus.

W-He was involved in so many communities that loved him. As far as who Daymon was, that is a hard thing to say. He was a number of Daymons. He was one of the most loyal friends you could ever have. A dude you could call any time of the day if you were in trouble or anything was going on. Dude didn't have a job and took care of his grandma at his parents' house and hung out a bit. His routine was get up, get on instant messenger, talk on the Internet, download all these songs. He also collected dvds. Watch some of those, make food, take care of his grandma, go out at seven. So he was always accessible, always around. Someone would be like "Hey Daymon I'm stuck out here at Half Priced book store, tried to go do this and I'm gonna be late for work." So he would drive all the way from Westerville and pick you up to take you to work. He was always there for his friends. He always had an ear for his friends, really funny, charismatic.

T-He wasn't one of those dudes that people didn't start liking after he was dead. It wasn't like when he was gone, "Ah man I missed out on that dude." When he was around people really appreciated him.

W-He was really warm, humble. One of his greatest traits was putting people at ease because he was a giant. Now that he is gone you realize he was a giant. At the time you might have been like "That dude's got big hair," but in fact he was a giant. Somebody said what should have been painted on the Tuttle wall was Daymon as Godzilla with his arms out like this. Basically he was a giant, huge, real boisterous, a real funny charismatic guy and very loyal, honest.

T- There is something too that is kinda like it almost doesn't matter what the fuck you're thinking; you can still be friends with people. I'm guilty of it when I see a group of people, frat kids hanging at brother's or some shit like that, "These guys are fucking douchebags." But Daymon didn't care. If one of them was into comic books he would be there drinking at happy hour with them.

W- Don't get around the fact that he was a Republican and was a compassionate conservative. But part of him being a Republican was that you love your friends. Probably if his dad wasn't high ranking in the Republican Party he might have been a Libertarian or something like that. He was a full supporter of the Iraqi War and we would talk about it. His main thing was that people who claimed to care about things are liars and they're basically trying to take a moral high ground. He said that I care about getting cheap prices on gas. He didn't want people in Iraq to die. He thought that everybody was hypocrites and people that are against the Iraq War were full of shit. I used to fuck with

[1] Gism-quintessential Japanese hardcore band renown in the underground for songs such as "Syphilitic Vaginas".

him and be like you can't be a Republican and he would go nuts and there would be no argument against it because one, you can't tell a black person how they should be. It's up to an individual's decision how to view the world. Two, he passionately believed in being a compassionate conservative and when you would say you can't be a Republican. What the fuck? He would reply, "No, I believe in being a compassionate conservative, it's about taking care of your friends and your family and having the power to choose for yourself who you're gonna help and who you're not going to help." He thought that you can more directly help people yourself than government funding

That's funny because I believe those same things but might call it anarchism.

W- That's the thing, he probably would be a libertarian or an anarchist if his dad wasn't a high ranking member in the Republican Party. In the 60's and 70's a lot of social programs in the government were referred as being "poverty pimps." All this money put into the inner city would be taken away, they were making a living off of it. I was Googling his dad and his dad would take over non-profit organizations sometimes where money was mismanaged. His dad was definitely a community activist and was involved in social activism and helping people. His dad was also a republican so that might have stemmed from growing up and seeing money mismanaged. Faith-based charities might have seemed the best idea to Daymon because he knew where the money was going. So that might have been the root where Daymon was a Republican, his dad was a Republican as opposed to an anarchist or a libertarian.

He would find common ground with anybody. I think he was the only real Christian ever. He walked amongst everybody, didn't judge anybody, was unconditionally nice to his friends, loved everyone. Maybe he wasn't the only real Christian, but he was a nice guy. At the same time, you know when you have to deal with people who are Christian they are usually pretty judgmental, mean, kinda bad people, hateful, spreading lots of negative energy. He actually exuded comfort and positive energy. I've never met anyone in my life like that. I don't think he violated the Ten Commandments. I know he coveted thy neighbor's wife, but other than that, he didn't have pre-marital sex, didn't fight people. He never violated the tenants of his religion. I'm not a religious person but at the same time there is a certain respect you have for somebody that lives in the world we live in. Christianity could be idealism, a positive idealism but you never see it come aboard. I think he manifested the aspects of love, brotherhood, non-judgment, bringing people together and compassion that his religion never had except for Jesus.

How did you all meet Daymon?

W- I don't know exactly when I met him. I probably met him at the Smiling Rhino(long defunct bar).

P- I've known him since kindergarten.

T- Through the hip hop scene. I met him about ten years ago. Started going to Bernie's hip hop night and then being more involved in the hip hop scene.

What involvement did he have with the hip hop night?

W- Daymon was always around, he was charismatic, he was giant. Daymon was the host because he was so warm. If you came into hip hop night, Prism might be there DJing, looking at some girl's butt saying "I want to fuck all these girls, all of them." And then Daymon would be the guy looking at somebody being like, "It's cool that guy came. He's got cool hair, I like him." He accepted anybody because everyone had something that was funny about them or nice. There was always something about somebody that was redeeming. He was the host and was really energetic. He could get the crowd to mosh, to do anything because he had charisma and he had a great sense of humor.

What exactly happened at the parade?

T- Nobody knew what to expect. Everyone was looking at each other like, "Is this really gonna happen?" It was one of happiest moments coming out of one of the saddest moments that I've had in my adult life. It was peaceful and simple. We all just convened at Tuttle Park, two cops came, his dad had a saying, thanked everyone for coming out and we basically walked down and everyone was chanting his nickname, "Racist Joe!" Everyone saw it and completely had no idea. We were making noise. If you were to look at it you would think it was some kind of picturesque Pepsi commercial party on a roof. Here's the black guy, here the white guy, here's the guy with a mohawk. They're all having fun together!

w-I think there was more of an element of absurdity to it. Everybody was standing there waiting to go. Did you ever skateboard? You know when you're about to drop in on a big ramp and everybody is standing there really tense, your adrenaline is going. Everybody started walking and there were all kinds of banners. Tony made a giant Daymon that was put in the back of a truck, a stuffed animal Daymon. People from his church started chanting, "Gimme a R, gimme an A, gimme a C, gimme a I, gimme a S, gimme a T, what's that spell? RACIST!" People were holding pictures of him with his afro. You got these weird ass hipster kids, metal kids, punk rockers, skater kids, kids on bikes and all these black people, his grandmother and a police escort. You got all these college kids standing there on their porches standing there who had just watched the Buckeyes beat the Cincinnati Bearcats

T- Standing there with their cornhole bags [2].

W- Standing there like, "What is going on?" I'm sure somebody searched on the internet if there has been a racial murder. Caused it spelled "Racist." We were chanting all these different things. If you listened to what we were chanting it was fucking ridiculous. It was awesome. There was this level of absurdity because you have the Ohio State campus. And you know what the Ohio State campus is like. It's fucking Manhattan during the football game. There's a million people everywhere in one little area.

T- They blocked the entire south-bound lane of High street from Lane Ave all the way down to Fifth. It started around dusk. It was light out when we started. When we finished it was night. When I looked back the line of traffic was so snarled. It was all the way to Worthington. People were like, "What the fuck is going on?"

W- No one knew what was going on. They couldn't turn on their car radio and hear that this and this happened. We probably had an audience of 30,000 people in cars, all the football people. The football game was over and there were people out yelling, "Show your titties," as we were walking by.

T- For me the coolest thing was seeing the parents show up. For the parents to see something. I've known the parents for a long time and it was overwhelming.

W- There were all these church people standing there watching kids smoking blunts, drinking 40s. All these 50-year-old upstanding community members walking around watching kids do graffiti. Everyone's like "Stop cussing." This kid I know who painted the picture of Daymon on Tuttle way, that kid had been up all night doing drugs showed up yelling at everyone cause he's a little smart ass. Daymon's mom shows up and he's smoking a blunt. I'm like "Do you want to meet this kid who painted your son?" She says "Yes, yes." Even though he's a graffiti kid, his parents are hugging this kid and he's feeling so much warmth because he actually did something that touched somebody. Daymon's parents are so touched because somebody painted their son's image. That really makes it.

T- If you do it for anyone, Mr. and Mrs. Dodson should be reminded once a year that they did a good thing in creating and raising Daymon. If anything, beyond the fact that he would love it that we were doing this thing. If anything, he'd loved the absurdity and all the cultural connection. He would just be happy that we were making his mom and dad happy. That's only a fraction of the happiness that he gave. We can only remind them that he meant something.

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[2] Cornhole-I don't know what its like in the college neighborhood in your own but this game, in which you through beanbags into wooden boxes with a hole, is quite popular here. I have no idea why it's called this but it's all you see people doing in their front yards. Oh yeah, It's a drinking game of course.

W- I think they're learning more about their son everyday from his death, seeing all his friends at the parade. They still have someone to think about and care about. Their relationship with him is still growing. Even though he is gone. They are learning more about their son, which, in a way, means he is still there for them.

How did he get that nickname "Racist Joe?"

T- He gave it to himself.

W- We were at Derek Bartlett's house and they were talking about this guy, whose real name is Skinhead Joe. Derek was saying this guy was always making racist jokes and that this guy was so racist his friends called him "Racist Joe." You know there's Fat Joe, Big Pun, they're descriptive, Lil' Kim. The first thing you say about this guy was that he's a racist and Daymon thought racism was really funny. He thought that racial humor was hilarious. He thought it was awesome that this guy's natural reaction was to be racist all the time. So he took this guys name, "Racist Joe" because he thought it was funny. Two, he liked to antagonize other black people. It was a punk rock thing. You know, Sex Pistols, God Save the Queen, some shit like that. People saying, "Fuck something." Well for a black person to say fuck black history, or I don't care about slavery is really...He would have names for himself like William Slavery or Warren Coon. As an individual he wasn't ashamed to be black. He was definitely against police brutality, he was against racism.

T- He was educated.

W- He knew it would bother other black people and did it so people would get mad at him because they couldn't believe what he was doing, what he was allowing. He had Martin and them make an album cover for the Racist Joe album. The cover that he commissioned had Klan hoods on it and a family tree, which is actually a lynching branch. He knew it would bother people so much that a black person was advocating it and at the same time he felt like he could argue the point. He especially liked to bother white, liberal kids. He liked the idea that if you're a white liberal kid and you got bothered with it he would be like, "I'm black, who are you white person to take away my empowerment by telling me I'm not allowed to make racist jokes or make fun of my black family?" So the name Racist Joe was an antagonistic thing. He had a sense of humor. I guess you have to understand it was a post modern, not black, as in an African American thing, but dark humor/black humor. It was meant to be funny

What kind of effect will the parade have on the indie community that Daymon was the patron saint of?

W- It's really a way for a community who needs to express themselves, their pain, that wants a place to put their hurt, their energy and everything to show they care. I think that's our main goal really. More than anything else I want it to be therapeutic. I want it to be something that people have an outlet for whatever they feel. To realize they're not alone to understand that other people are feeling the same way. I think that anything involving someone being dead is really serving the people who are grieving more than serving the actual person. It's an outlet for people to realize they're all doing something

T- It will be a good memory. It's so easy to be forgotten. Look how many people go through their lives and die living twice as much life as Daymon did and are promptly forgotten. I think he reminds you why we do things, because of your friends, these people you share humor with you can look at things with and laugh about.

P- It's important to also do things in a way he would have enjoyed also because he wouldn't want us all sitting around down in the dumps like "Oh man, he's gone." He would've wanted us to go out and do fun things. If we're gonna remember him it should be in a way he would have been proud of.

W- He was definitely the catalyst. When we'd be bored, he'd find a house to have a house party at or something. Find some random house and call it up and show up. His whole thing was it's better to do something tonight then not do something tonight. Regardless of what it is. Make something happen. So he wouldn't want us to sit around and mope. He would want us to make something happen. He would want something fun. He loved attention so he loved to be the one to do that.

The one thing that I remember him as was the person that would come to every single show or party I'd ever go to. He'd be there.

T- He called himself the black Zach Starkey 3.

W- Me and him would argue about that. "You do not want to be the black Zach Starkey," I'd tell him, "You are way cooler."

T- I think it was purely in the sense that everywhere you went, they were there and they had weird hair. The similarities end there.

W- You know how people say, "I'm not going there. I don't like these people?" His whole thing was we could sit here and be hung up on this or we can actually enjoy ourselves. I'm gonna go out to everything because I would rather see something than sit at my house and watch some dvd. He would rather go do something than not do something, have fun than sit at home

T- Back to the question, I think what it can be for people in Columbus is a point of pride. Because were all pretty proud of knowing him, he was a cool dude. You know there's people in Minneapolis who talked about him. This is chance for people in Columbus to have a really cool unique event we can all be proud of in his name. I think that would be something we could appreciate. That would mean something in Columbus because there has to be more than just the fucking Memorial Tournament, Red,White and Boom, the Michigan game [4].

W- It's about Daymon, but it's not about Daymon.

T- Our plan is that we're all gonna die. I'm not really planning that but know that it's gonna happen. And you know if we just do this just for Daymon,in five or six years, you'll have a kid and he'll have a kid, the memory will fade out. In five or six years there's gonna be more of us dying. I don't like saying that but it's true. In a hundred years from now some travel channel will be like, "Yeah this week we're heading to Columbus, Ohio for the Daymon Day parade, an annual event that's been going around for over a hundred years." We'll give this paragraph long biography of Saint Daymon that will hopefully be canonized over the years that will catch the main jist of that guy.

Like the new Doo Dah Parade[5] but better?

W- Way better.

T- This year already we have lost DJ Prism and few other people in the community that have passed away too. It's a chance for anyone that's missed someone to go out and grieve that person and celebrate their life and a great big non-sponsored mass of humanity.

Will there be a Daymon Day parade this year?

T- Yes, September 15th. Tickets go on sale(laughs)...Naw.

Anything different this year? What should we expect?

T- Bigger. Last year pretty much hit the nail on the head. I think the only thing different this year is tha[illegible]e encourage anyone that lost anyone to come and celebrate that person's life along with Daymon's. It's basically two hours on Saturday once a year that you go and be happy that you knew someone whether it was a grandfather, a best friend, your dog, Daymon.

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[3] Zach Starkey-a local celebrity of sorts. A young man who is seen everywhere all the time. An eye-catching character who puts his face on everyone of his own show flyers. Known for his smart fashion sense and jagged dyed hair. Kinda the butt of everyone's jokes

W- Hopefully they get it and understand that there are things bigger than what's going on in your immediate life.

Do you expect a Daymon Day parade in 5 years, 10 years, a hundred years from now?

T- I would be disappointed if it's not happening in a hundred years from now.

W- I'm just waiting for the day when all you guys are gone so I can have a benefit and give all the money to the Republican Party like Daymon would've wanted.

I remember hearing that the name of Damon's graffiti crew was the GOP, the Gods of Pain after the Republican Party.

W- No, that was a joke. He only wrote graffiti with me once and got arrested. That was a joke. That was when he was shooting bottle rockets at the Nine Shocks Terror show and he knew that people would be bothered that he was a Republican. He thought it would be really funny if he had a crew called the GOP. That wasn't a real crew. It never existed. He would post that on the internet and tell people that he was the Gods of Pain because he thought it would be funny to be a pro-Bush graffiti writer.

P- I think he hit it up once at the BLD[6].

How was it getting the permit?

P- Pretty easy, we've done this basketball tournament since 2003 so I know the procedure pretty well. Call up the city, call the right people. There were two permits. One for the graffiti wall, the picnic part of it, and then there was the parade permit that Tony took care of. So as far as on my end, I didn't really have to do too much besides promise that we wouldn't mess up their walls and say that it would look better when we're done.

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[4] Memorial Tournament, Red,White and Boom, the Michigan game- These are the local events that seems to be big deals around here for whatever reason. One is a major golf tournament, what the fourth of July fireworks called and the college football game with OSU's biggest rival. Days of major traffic conjestion.

[5] Doodah Parade-The annual dada-esque parade that happens every Spring in the Short North. Most famous for the cadre of Fidel look-a-likes that is an institution of the event.

[6] BLD- a long-running but now defunct warehouse space by the train tracks south of campus that houses all sorts of artist, activists and weirdos for a good part of the past decade.

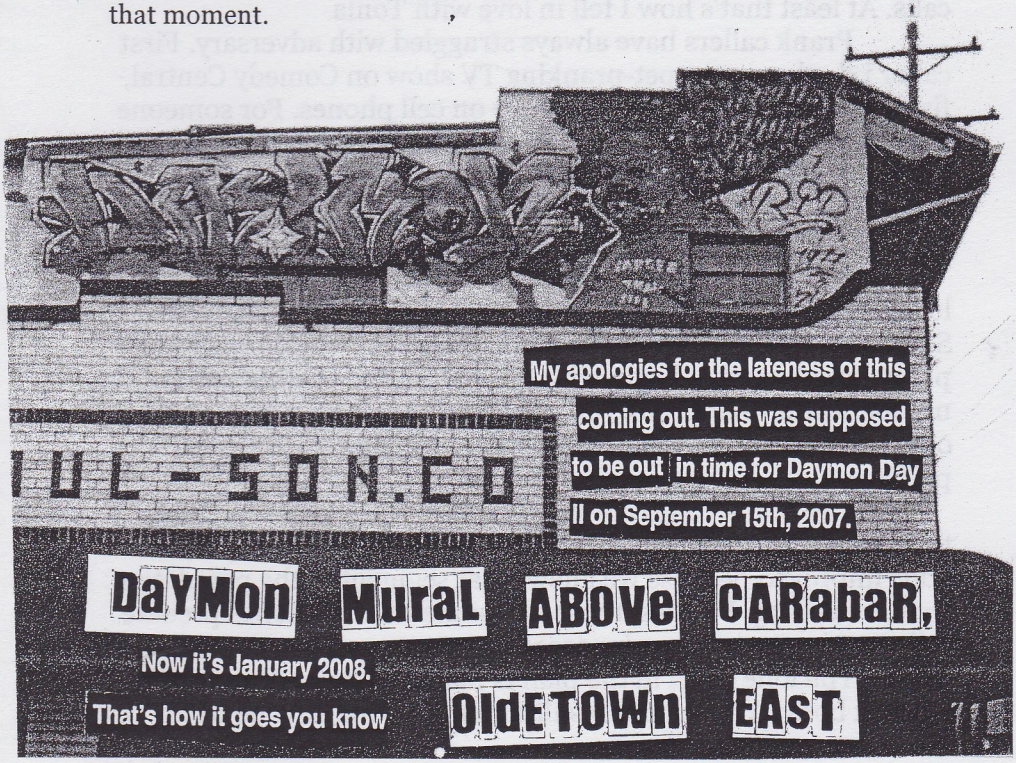
T- We actually have the constitutional right to assembly. I was a little surprised. I was like, "Wait a second, we are by law allowed." Officer Greg Jones was really awesome about putting it all together and thought it was a really good idea. He was really cool about it. I find that saying that about a police officer is really hard for me. He was a really cool guy. It surprised me it was something we all have a right to do. It's protected under the Constitution to assemble and march. It's a basic thing, you know the Boston Tea Party. Remember that shit?

If Daymon could send a message to each of you after seeing this, what would he have to say?

P- He would laugh his ass off.

W- He would say "Did you see that? Whooo, whhooo!" Pointing at every person in the parade, "Ahhhhhhhh, that's Bubba that's Bubba!"

T- I don't think he would say anything. He had this ability that came from being in a loud room and you couldn't say anything. One of my favorite memories of him was when we'd both be on opposite sides of a room, looking at the same absurdity, some girl would walk in, something crazy. We'd both notice that we were both watching the same thing and then we'd have this look of understanding. I think that's kinda hard to explain. There would be this thing that you can't say out loud, but we both understand the absurdity of whatever was going on in that moment.





PRANK CALL ROMANCE

By Bret Liebendorfer

Dial 262 and then any four numbers. Those were usually the best prank calls. At least that's how I fell in love with Tonia.

Prank callers have always struggled with adversary. First caller i.d., then a puppet-pranking TV show on Comedy Central, finally society's critical dependence on cell phones. For someone who grew up during the heydays of the Prank Generation, I can say today's sentiments don't favor this practical joke, and I certainly wouldn't recommend entering the field now. Fortunately, I went out with a bang...almost.

Before I get too far ahead of myself in this tale of lost love, I should explain the process behind our prank. The Ohio State University uses a phone system where all the dorms have phone numbers that begin with the 262 prefix. Dialing any four numbers after that prefix will call a random dorm room - and only a dorm room - because other departments use different prefixes.

The prank caller always begins one step ahead because they know the call is a prank. When we pranked the dorms, our odds improved because we knew what segment of the population we were calling. Besides, those antiquated dorm phones predate call-tracking technology by decades.

The lone hitch in the plan is that OSU has a diverse student body. A call could resulting in pranking anyone from

some nerdy, upperclassman that lives high up in Morrill Tower and studies molecular biology to a bubbly and naïve south-campus coed who's undecided...but looking for fun. Usually, it didn't matter – it was easy to improvise. On the night I met Tonia, I was hardly in peak form. I had been drinking to escape my current situation as much as the one where my life had taken me, but this is hardly a place for excuses. Besides, Tonia fell in love with me all the same.

On a Friday night in autumn, I attended a small party hosted by Brute of a Man. A transplant from Chicago, he embodied every stereotypical German physical characteristic as accurately as he distanced himself from any trace of intellectualism. His life centered on parties and the telling of his fictional sexual conquests. He lived with his brother, Ambitionless Man, in a cozy townhouse bought by their dad. Ambitionless was similar enough to Brute physically, but was socially awkward and a pseudo-intellectual that made it a point to out inform anyone - anywhere. If someone challenged his viewpoint, he would debate them furiously with a mind that was so stubbornly closed that his opponent would surrender from exhaustion.

The party was attended by Nate, a 6'8" collegiate athlete and a genuine deep thinker who went on to master the *beyond*, his red-headed girlfriend Morgan, and five or six of her friends, or at the very least, friends of friends.

The women in attendance were about as exciting as a bag of rocks and reeked of mediocrity. It was under these pretenses that I took to calling the dorms asking anyone who answered if they were willing to go on a date. Big deal, at least I wasn't at home studying while my roommates went out partying leaving me alone with some inebriated prank caller.

Naturally, few students were sitting around the dorms waiting for my calls on a party night. The few I got a hold of replied to my date requests with everything from "Fuck you, faggot!" to "I'm sorry, but you must have the wrong number." Most numbers resulted in voice messages, and I usually left some variation of "Thanks for such an amazing time last night. Sorry I forgot to tell you about my outbreak. I hope we still have plans for tomorrow night..." or "You think you can get away with aborting *my* baby in a McDonalds bathroom stall? I'll show you!"

Finally after dozens of calls, Tonia answered, and my life was forever changed. Sort of.

Only fate could be so kind. Here was a sweet, albeit lonely, girl who was staying inside on a Saturday night to study not because

she wanted to get ahead, but because she had few friends besides her roommates, and their collegiate immaturity annoyed her. On the other end of the line was an equally sweet, albeit entirely way too drunk, boy who was making prank calls to escape a party he only went to because he had nothing better to do. This time there was no "fuck you," polite turndowns or even messages from someone you don't remember.

What I'm talking about is true love. Alright, not yet, but she went along with my prank, and, get this, she actually wanted to go out on the date.

I awoke with a sense of disorientation that I wouldn't wish upon anyone. It was dark, but the sounds of chirping birds and cartoons on a distant TV told me it was daylight. A stiff back told me I had slept the entire night on the floor...somewhere. My clothes smelled of stale booze, and judging by all the clothes hanging immediately above me, I must have been in a walk-in closet.

Hazy, gap-filled memories from the night before trickled back and I realized I never left the party. It was probably for the better, though how I ended up in the closet is still a mystery. I exited past empty liquor bottles, guests I didn't recognize crashing on the micro-suede couches, and overturned furniture (did I do that?), and let myself out to begin the walk of shame home. The sunshine ignited a migraine headache that slowed my procession, and after my eyes adjusted I noticed some manic writing scrawled on my arm.

Those cruel bastards! What fuck would get off on writing all over another human being and dumping him in a closet? Where else did they write on me? I can't be walking around unbeknownst with swastikas etched on my face! I assumed at least they scrawled a come-spewing penis on me...somewhere. I suspected Brute of a Man because he often preyed on the first to pass out. While certainly cruel, I will say he did exhibit some creative side when drunk with a marker.

As I tried to make sense of the scribbles, I realized the handwriting was mine. It wasn't entirely legible, but by the time I got home I could decipher a name, seven digits and a time.

I remembered the call with a sense of fondness an alcoholic learns to adopt instead of the deep shame he should feel. I overlooked my misdeeds and I refused to acknowledge (let alone take responsibility) that I had been in the wrong last night. Anything perceived as positive was exaggerated and those exaggerations were immortalized – already I wasn't such a loser after all.

Instead, I thought of my new-found love and how I could woo any girl in the entire world, if only I should desire. Yep, I sure could, but why would I want anyone else when I have Tonia?

Many of the events from the previous night, however, were bizarre. While I was entertained by the novelty of agreeing to meet a random girl I prank called, I was worried. I mean, what girl would meet a random stranger, especially one that doesn't remember, exactly, how he awoke in a closet?

Was this some kind of setup? A cruel joke? Was Tonia some three-ton, maimed freak that gets off on ruining men's fantasies? Despite being desperate for some lady attention, I recalled some hitch-hiking wisdom a Midwestern truck driver had told me once somewhere between Ohio and California.

"Never pick up a single female hitchhiker," said the grizzled veteran of the road. "She's either crazy and will be quick to knife you, a prostitute that will go to any lengths to steal your money...or....WORSE!" The growl he omitted when he hissed "worse" was no longer Midwestern but primal. Even without evidence, he convinced me never to trust a woman that knowingly puts herself in a position to be harmed. It's too bad, Tonia, you sounded sweet on the phone, I think. You probably even had a great since of humor and weren't afraid of adventure. Who knows, maybe we could have been.

While recuperating and making the periodic empty promise to never drink again, I got a call from Brute of a Man.

"Yo bro, so where'd you end up last night? After all those shots, you kept prankin' while I was busy bangin.'"

I prepared myself for what was likely to come next – a graphic, but entirely fictional account of his sexual exploits. I honestly believed he had never been laid. For the first time I began to seriously consider that promise never to drink again (along with a commitment to find some new friends). I prayed for salvation.

"Yo, I'll tell ya all about it some other time, you'll never guess how crazy this bitch was, but, hey, get this."

My prayer had worked. Brute rarely had anything meaningful to say, but at least I wouldn't have to hear about something along the lines of how his 10-pump technique could make any woman come. Fuck, I really will have to follow through with that promise to quit drinking because some higher being was granting impunity. I had accepted its help even though it would probably demand total obedience for eternity. At least I was saved from Brute's sexual tall tales.

"So, yeah, Morgan called this mornin,' she's that red-headed broad from the party last night." Brute spoke between bites of something too crunchy to be breakfast. "She says that one broad you called randomly, Tammy, or something like that, is her roommate."

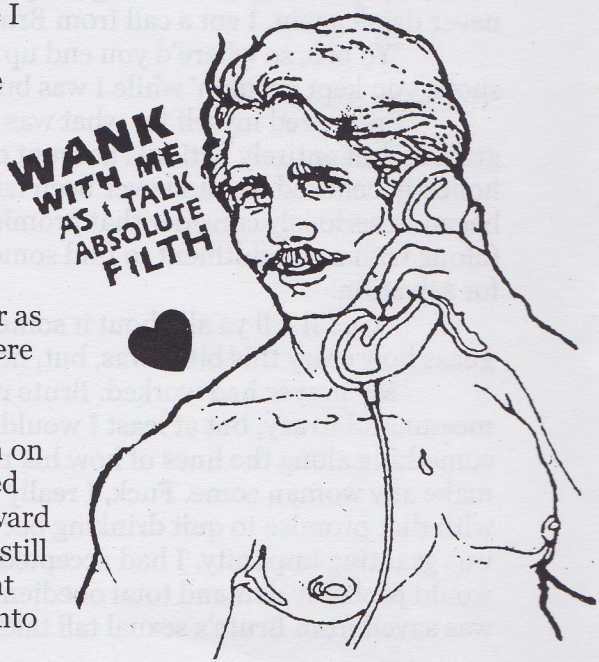
Despite being saved from Brute's thinly masqueraded wet dreams, I postponed the I'll-never-drink-again agreement with my savior, and made plans for another party at his house for the following weekend. Morgan would invite her roommates, and I would finally meet Tonia.

The swanky, bachelor pad Brute of a Man shared with his brother was not the ideal place to meet a lady for the first time, but I had no choice. I could not read the location I had scribbled on my arm, and I was too nervous to call her back.

If you're pressed for time or prefer not to read about unnecessary disappointment you should stop here. Despite the trucker's words of wisdom, we met. Tonia was hardly a quick-to-knife-me psycho, a money-stealing prostitute, or...WORSE. Instead she was gorgeous, fun and we completely hit it off...at first.

Ultimately, our relationship only lasted a few dates because we had absolutely nothing in common except we were hoping for something more than a chance prank call could ever accomplish.

She grew up near Cleveland and her family was obsessed with Judaism, so much so that she was afraid her parents would disown her if they found out she dated a gentile. While I grew up in Ohio, I didn't even know my home state had a Jewish population until I was in college. Punk rock was as foreign to her as Israel was to me. My tales of traveling and BMX were about as interesting to her as Zionism and the Torah were to me.



We enjoyed a few dates, a long conversation on a campus bench that lasted until sunrise and an awkward physical romance (that is still exciting to remember) that would not translate well into words.

The first night we met it felt like we were perfect for each other. We didn't even need to have similar interests (thanks alcohol!). The night consisted of wandering drunkenly from one random party to the next with Tonia clinging to me nonstop. We resembled a drunken sumo wrestler more than a couple hot for each other.

Eventually we found our way back to her dorm. I couldn't believe a prank call could get me this far this quick! Once inside it didn't matter if we had absolutely nothing in common because by this point he had *everything* in common. Frantically we made out while inching towards her bedroom. Inside the claustrophobic area I could see two sets of bunk beds. Three beds were filled with sleeping roommates.

Needless to say, I knew which one we would be sleeping in and that the night was more or less over. We never could rekindle that attraction we had over the phone. Our only sober interaction occurred all night on a lonely campus bench. We only noticed it was morning because of the hustle of students struggling to make early classes and the birds that were telling us to get some sleep. That night still ranks among the best moments I had at OSU, but it was then that we realized we weren't meant to be.

EPILOGUE

I bumped into Tonia a few times around campus in the following years and we had less to say each time. I'm not sure if we were both just kind-hearted people, respectful enough to give the other a few minutes of our time, or that we held on to some vanishing connection, a unique experience that was almost something.

Years have gone by since I've seen her. While writing this story I did a quick Facebook search for her, but I did not have high expectations considering our school boasts a student body of 50,000 students (plus all those who graduated can still remain on OSU's Facebook page). Besides, I could not remember her last name. Was it Goldstein? Bergman? I thought those had to be too stereotypical so I excluded her surname in the search and diminished my chances of finding her.

Sure enough, Tonia appeared as the first result on my search. I guess I shouldn't have been surprised because stranger things had happened in our relationship. While skimming through her profile I learned she recently got married, moved to Israel, and is expecting her first child. Her husband has the long strands of curly hair I've only seen Jews have in Brooklyn and on TV.

A few months after Tonia, I met Michelle after sneaking in to see a concert. Drunkenly I invited her and her friend Stacey to a post-show party. We must have invited every girl inside the entire venue, but, as it turns out, Michelle and Stacey were the only ones interested. It was about as classy as my prank call date requests.

Once home it would be a lie to call the awkward setting a party. There were five in attendance and my fridge only had three beers.

We decided at this point that only more alcohol could save the rapidly deteriorating situation, but it was past beer o'clock and the stores would not begin selling booze until 6 a.m. Besides, we were all underage. I turned to the most exciting option I could think of that would deliver some alcohol to an underage group – sneak into a seedy nightclub. All was well until I tried to order a pitcher of beer, and we were promptly thrown out. The cops working the front door, that we didn't even know were there, said we would be arrested if we ever tried to pull that stunt again.

Michelle was also raised Jewish in an affluent Cleveland suburb, but she cares little about the religion, loves punk rock and tolerates BMX. Last November marked four years we've been together.

In Circleville, these 'Chuck Taylors' are must-haves, too

By Holly Zachariah
THE COLUMBUS DISPATCH

The teenager approached 72-year-old Chuck Taylor on the streets of Circleville and asked if he could have one of his campaign yard signs.

Neat, Taylor thought. *Even the kids are interested in my run for mayor.*

Uh, or maybe not.

Taylor went home and rustled up a sign, and called the boy's mom to say that he had found one. She was mildly amused.

"You do know why he wants it, right?" the woman asked.

Nope, Taylor answered.

So she broke the news: "It's because he doesn't want to steal one like his friends did."

It's not that Taylor is so hip that even those who aren't old enough to vote want to campaign for him. It's that he shares his name with a very famous and popular shoe.

Seems it's the thing in Circleville this season to snatch an Elect Chuck Taylor sign. Presumably, they're now hanging in bedrooms all over town. Thirty of Taylor's 100 signs, an election staple for which he paid $4 apiece, have been swiped so far.

As the mom explained it to Taylor, the kids think it's cool to have the sign because the Converse All Star Chuck Taylor basketball shoes, the ubiquitous lace-up, canvas hi-tops that have been around forever, are popular and still very much in style.

When Taylor heard this, he asked his grown son to ex-

Chuck Taylor and his sign

plain these mysterious shoes. Then he looked them up on the Internet, only to discover they've been around since the 1920s, and Converse says it has sold more than 580 million pairs.

"Heck, if the kids wanted them, I'd have given them the signs," Taylor said Wednesday, "But after the election, preferably."

Now, Taylor, an independent who has three opponents for the mayor's seat in the Nov. 6 election, can only laugh it off: "Good thing I wouldn't have to know about shoes to run the city."

He does, however, own a single pair of sneakers. He couldn't find them in his closet. They're buried under something, he supposes.

He has no idea what brand they are.

hzachariah@dispatch.com



It's the first official day of spring. We spent all last night, or morning, in Buckeye Donuts dancing on the counter and eating the strawberry filled for free when no-one was looking. It was all in honor of Snorteland's last day, or night, of work. Crane and I are on our way back up to the Donut for no good reason but that it's fucking beautiful outside. We've said sorry to classes for the day.

Our destination is where we first became friends, years back. It's funny how you can walk in circles all your life and sometimes it's ok. I knew no one when I moved here. To assuage the loneliness I walked High Street aimlessly hoping something to happen. Usually I'd just stop and play Medieval Madness pinball in the arcade that was in the back of Subway. One night I stepped out only to bump into Crane who recognized me from campus. He was on his way to her friends' house. He asked if I wanted to go with him there and smoke tons of weed, which we did. Later on in the morning we found ourselves stuffing donuts into our faces stoned out of our brains. I knew I had made a real friend.

In front of Used Kids just a block away later that year, he stops.

"Hey let's peek in here for a second. What do you say?" I nod and follow him into the record store. Before we can proceed up the stairs he halts with a gasp.

"Whoa, Brian...Whoa! Check this out."

He moves to the side to let me see the assemblage of objects he's squatting by in the corner of the atrium. There is a large book with a pair of used skateboard trucks on top. Around it is an assortment of polaroids. On top of it all is mounds of sprinkled glitter.

I don't say a thing. We begin to inspect the offering. I flip through the pages of the tattered book. It's some sort of anthology of underground literature. Crane, a skateboarder, inspects the trucks.

"You know what I think about this, Brian?"

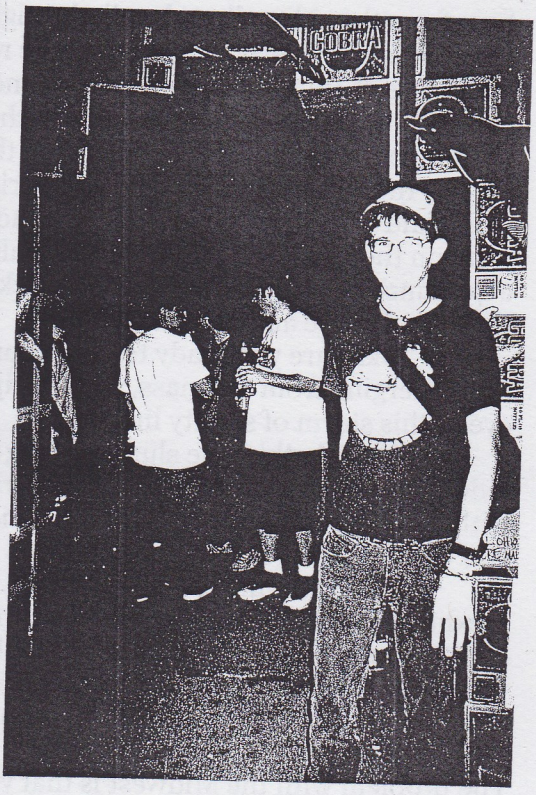
"What is that?" I ask, mesmerized.

"I think that this stuff was here for us to find."

Once again, I don't respond. I grin inwardly. I know it's true. Is it some kind of spell we've stumbled upon? He parts with the trucks and I keep the book. We split up the polaroids, all photos of places, inanimate objects or just plain indecipherable. The glitter is left behind as we go upstairs. Some cling to our pants making a shimmering trail as they fall off on our way up to the record store.

You can never predict when the first day of spring will occur. After the long Midwestern winter, which sadly doesn't happen that much anymore, it's the best day of the year. People act out, magical things happen. I don't remember what impulse-buy records I purchased that day, but I do remember the dog eared book I walked away with. It changed a lot in my mind. I don't remember much of what it was about, but what I do remember explicitly is Crane and what a friend he has always been ever since. The sidewalk offerings we walked away with became symbols of our bond. Friendship persists because of the things you go through together. Adversity, necessity, synchronicity - there is always a story left in your footsteps. Can you see the trail you make?

STALIN'S GRAND SON



"This is absurdity," I gloat. "I can't believe this exists."

But if not here, then where? Having the largest university in the nation, huge parties are an all too common occurrence. This is the logical extreme that it will inevitable be taken to. Has the heat made us hallucinate? Not at all.

Even at night you can see haze rising off the asphalt. Where we lack in raw temp, we make up in humidity. All the more reason for Will and I to quickened our pace. The real reason we are walking so fast is that were heading to an annual tradition called the 40-40s party. All we can do is look at each other and laugh. We intend to not party at all. Parasites that we've become in this town of excess, we intend to plunder.

The beginning of summer in Columbus is inaugurated by two events. Always coinciding with each other, neither of them you'll find on a calendar. The first you will hear through word of mouth. The other you can feel in the air.

Between Dick's "Why not?" Den and the Blue Danube lies the hallowed grounds upon which this festival is found. At the unassuming apartment complex courtyard an arch constructed from malt liquor boxes stands like an ancient Gallic gateway. We

turn from the sidewalk and walk through the portal. An obnoxious menagerie of pathetic indie rockers, fake college radicals, self-important graff writers and white hat chauncies are smashed up against each other, up to their sad old games. It's nothing but another weekend night in the student ghetto.

In the vortex of sarcastic gibberish and slurred attempts to get laid I begin to discern familiar faces. Taking aim,I keep a bead on their surfacing faces in the multitude. Occasionally I see a 40 ounce or two disappear into a backpack as I make my way through. I smile and wink at Will.

"Okay are you ready to do this or what?" Chad stands with him emerging from the mass, slightly tipsy but determined, in the eye of this storm of sweaty limbs.

"Let's do this," he slurs, looking over to the inflatable kiddie pool to the left. The plastic contraption is filled to the lip with ice water and the green glass of Mickey's malt liquor. Next to it is what is left of the 40 ounce cases.

"We better move fast my friend. That is not the inexhaustible supply that it would seem. It's not even 11 pm yet."

I look over my shoulder to Will but he has suddenly vanished. Nowhere to be seen, another casualty of Friday night. The mission must proceed without him.

The problem with the Midwest is that you never get to enjoy any of the seasons. You get a taste of them all, which is nice, but it's like free samples at the grocery store. The novelty wears off quick and is exhausted even quicker. Never satisfied. As the cold grip of winter lets you go, the insidious humidity makes you wish you could put your coat back on. Midwesterners love to talk about weather. Though it may seem like we have nothing else important in our lives, complaining about weather is the way we secretly express our emotions.

If the Midwest is America's bread basket than the people that inhabit the region are its beer belly. By the time finals week approaches at Ohio State University, you probably wont need to go looking for flyers to know that Central Ohio's Premium Malt Liquor Event is imminent. The first indication that summer has arrived, sweating to sleep, the second soon follows. The 40-40s party is a generous public celebration of another trip around the sun with forty cases of forty ounce beers. That's 19,200 ounces of beer, 480 bottles at $2.19 a crack roughly comes to be $1,050.21. All purchased by the residents of those yellow apartments by Blake Avenue.

I always wondered what strain of idiots would spend that kind of money on free booze for any one to wander off High Street

into their house. Naturally, I made it my duty to take as much of it as possible. I used to be morally torn over this. Were they inspiringly gracious and naively idiotic? Then I found out our hosts were drug dealers so I didn't feel bad anymore trying to make off with as many cases as I could carry.

We make the mad dash across the fluorescent traffic of High Street into the parking lot of UDF. Each holding 2 cases a piece, there is little discreetness. What we lack in stealth we make up in foot speed and sheer boldness.

"Fuck.....Brian. Over this way, quick!"

"We need to hide these before someone sees us. I can't run that much more." I respond following Chad into the cut through. We stop before the bushes in the alley.

"Not here, we gotta do it in a front yard, no one will look there."

"Here...this'll work."

Looking around to make sure no one has followed us we place the booty in the dark recesses of the shrubbery. The humming of the streetlights serenade our conspiracy.

"What do you want to do now?" I ask. He looks around.

"Go back." His crooked teeth grin.

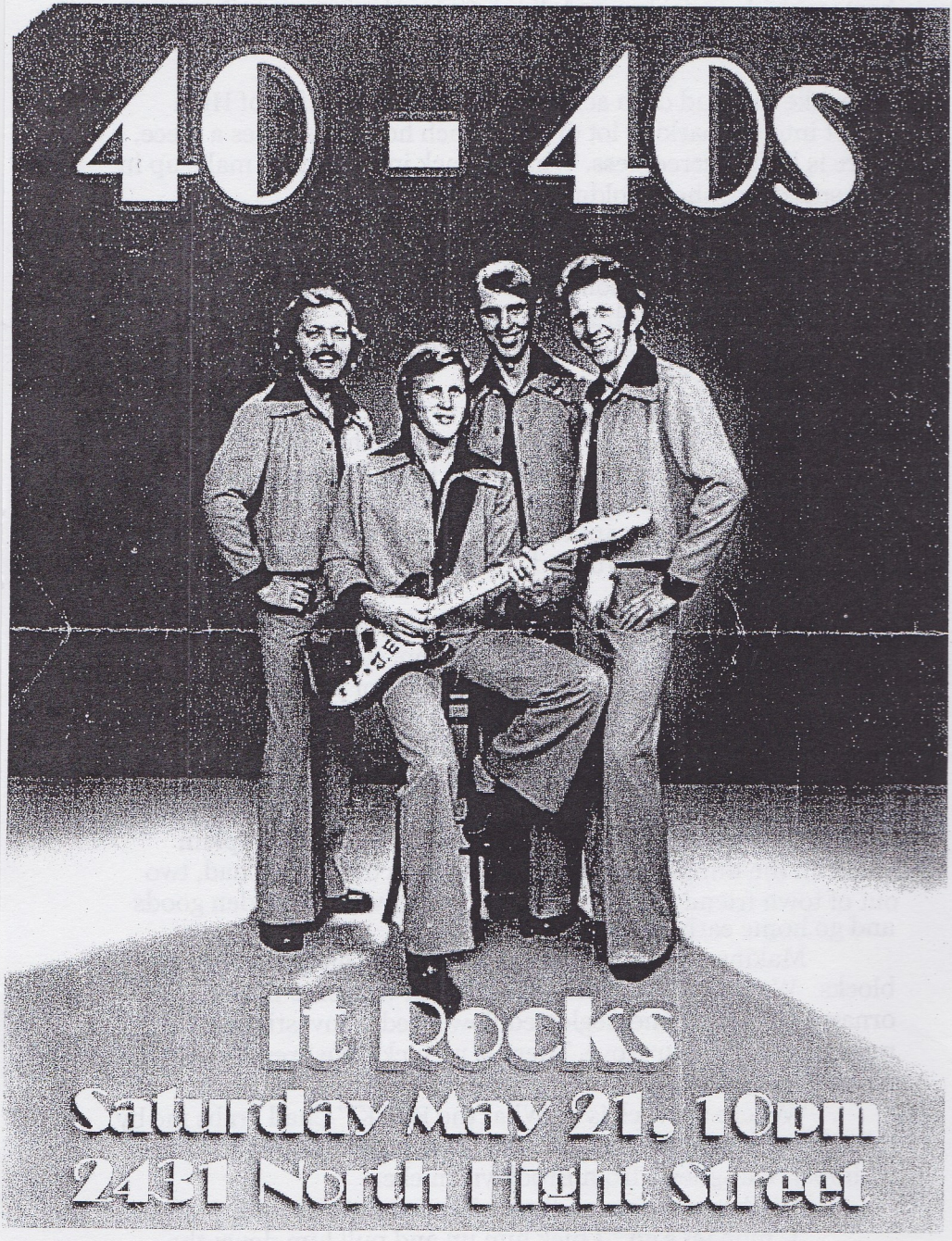
This first week of summer always ends with an explosion of dangerous foolishness. It's rather hard not to be a part of it. Especially after our typical winters. Weeks of pointless isolation when your friends live just blocks away. It's amazing we don't get arrested. Back at the party we find Will and everyone else. All the typical leaches have arrived. It reminds me of some Jawbreaker song, too far gone. The novelty of 40-40s has worn of and now it's just another boring party. Just another summer to complain about all the things we could be doing with out lives. Chad, two out of town friends and I split to try to recover the hidden goods and go home early.

Making a right to Summit Avenue we meander for a few blocks. We should have turned back, but we don't. Every ornamental shrub and neglected flowerbed is investigated meticulously for our trove. There is no luck. We press on into the moist summer night.

"Where the fuck is it! What the FUCK!" Chad grabs me by the neck of my t-shirt hysterically. He trips and begins to whimper. Our guests from Brooklyn snicker.

"We're never gonna find it," he laments, flailing.

"C'mon let's go." I pick him up and pull him down the sidewalk.


40 - 40s
It Rocks
Saturday May 21, 10pm
2431 North High Street

From the corner of my eye I notice a tall angular man on his porch has been watching us the whole time with amusement. He steps down from his duplex toward us.

"Hey there!" He bellows, "What are you doing?" His voice is a blast furnace. Broad and unwavering. Another shadowy figures hunches on the porch behind him with a bottle in hand. Their door is open and rock music is blasting from within.

"Were just walking home and stuff." I answer.

"...And stuff?"

It's then that we notice our two friends dart up the slope to their porch, gesture to the shadowy figure and proceed in. I try not to let on what is going on behind the tall man's back.

"Yeah, 40-40s party. You ever hear of it?"

"No." He is less a human and more a wall.

I look back to Chad, frowning. He replies with a nervous glimmer. The tall man looks behind his shoulder and notices Maggie and Karissa scrambling out of his house. Karissa is putting something into her purse as the hunched figure follows them out. My head begins to swirl with the danger we are getting ourselves into.

My father always repeated this saying after telling me stupid things he did with his friends, as if to mollify the bad example he set. "When you take a ride with your friends, you'll take that ride to jail with them. There are no innocent bystanders." For once his prediction is coming true and the leviathan before me had me in his grips. I really should have listened and chose my idiot friends better.

The Brooklanders scurry down the steps into the alley with a screech. We won't see them again until long after dawn. The bald headed figure turns back toward me.

"Do you know who Joseph Stalin is?" he utters.

What? Of all things..What? This is one of those moments that Johnny Cash would describe, crooning, "Ohh and then the fire went wild..."

"Huh?" It's all I can muster to say, barely. Utter confusion and amazement. Of all the things he could ask me at this juncture of time, I'm going down the drain and it's not the free 40s I drank tonight.

"Do you know who Joseph Stalin is?" the man repeats himself carefully, annunciating every syllable like a jackhammer. I stand there mouth agape for seconds upon seconds trying to make sure I didn't imagine him saying that.

"DO YOU KNOW WHO JOSEPH STALIN IS?"

"YEAH, of course I know who Joseph Stalin was!" I snap regaining my wits. The cantankerous secretarian anarchist within me is coming to the rescue.

"Who was he?"

"Who was he?!" I yell back, clarity coming back. He looks me down fiercely, eyes red with impatience. I continue. "He was the leader of the Soviet Union. A mass murderer. The most despotic tyrant to walk the face of the earth. Who fucking cares!"

The giant's eyes are engulfed in flames. He reels back as if I had just decked him.

"WRONG!" He howls, throwing his head back. "How dare you say such a thing, I'll tell you who Joseph Stalin was."

"Hey are you guys going to sit down there all night or what?" The lurking figure on the porch butts into the turmoil, fresh beer in hand. Clad in a leather jacket, his coarse black hair is contained in a blue knit beanie. It's sweltering yet the slightly hunched backed fellow is committed to looking like the 5th member of the Ramones.

"Do you all want to come inside, drink beer and listen to Rock 'n Roll or what?"

I look back at Chad in disbelief. He is beyond any recognition of current events.

"Shut up Alan!" My interrogator thunders. Faintly I can make out the melodies of AC/DC emanating from within their abode, getting louder and louder.

"I'll have you know that Joseph Stalin was my grandfather. I am the grandson of Joseph Stalin."

Downright dumbfounded at this point but in my drunken persistence of anti-authoritarianism I press him.

"I tell you about your grandfather. He killed more people than Hitler. His own countrymen and women and personal allies. Ever heard of the Gulag? What is there to be proud of?"

"Idiot! IDIOT!" He rears back as if to sock me for the insult upon his family but nothing arrives to batter me down. "I'll have you know that Joseph Stalin was the best thing that happened to the Russian people. He brought industry and prosperity for all where it didn't exist before. Through the sheer power of his will alone, which runs though my veins as we speak." He swallows a huge breath and air and continues. "My great grandmother was a poor maid in Georgia. Joseph Stalin stayed at the hotel where she worked at when he was a very young man traveling, before any of his greatness. He had her there that night. My grandfather went on to become who he was, the greatest man of the 20th century. Dad immigrated to the United States never to



Joseph Stalin in happier years.

meet him. On his deathbed did he tell me the truth about our great past."

"That's great. He's still a murderer."

"So what the fuck! Are you all going to keep on arguing or are you gonna drink beers and listen to Rock 'n Roll."

The roommate barges into the debate again, demanding an ultimatum. He's the angriest of all us. On the verge of violence, only wanting a buddy to rock out with. Undaunted I continue arguing whether Uncle Joe was the greatest leader of the past century or its greatest war criminal. Fed up with me and losing his drunk, Chad rolls his eyes over and over again.

Were the illegitimate children of the proverbial Russian "Man of Steel" not told who their real father was for fear of reprisal? From Georgia to St. Petersburg, Rostov-on-Don to Columbus, Ohio, the offspring of the Eastern's Hemisphere's favorite dictator live on unacknowledged, unknown in secret lives or completely oblivious of their past.

Stalin was not the only Communist icon that sowed his wild oats across the Soviet sphere of domination. Ernesto "Che" Guevara and Mao Zedong were both notoriously documented for conceiving a line of illegitimate children longer than what their revolutionary paths took them. In 2003, an expedition organized by the Chinese government retraced the steps of the Long March; the epic journey Mao led his nascent red army guerillas over the hinterland of China while pursued by Chiang Kai-Shek. Not only did they discover that the flight was actually thousands of miles shorter than Mao claimed, but one of his illegitimate child, now in old age, was found unexpectedly in a small mountain village along the way. In Che's famous "Letter to Montevideo" he wrote Carlos Quijano, editor of the radical weekly La Marcha, about his view of love and the place for children in the socialist revolutions that were underway when he penned it in 1965. He states; "If a man thinks that dedicating his entire life to the revolution means, that in return he should not have such worries as that his son lacks certain things, or that his children's' shoes are worn out, or that his family lacks some necessity, then he is entering into rationalizations which open his mind to infection by the seeds of corruption." Did his cold calculation for the greater good of the revolution give him a justification to be a wayward father? The irresponsible sexual behaviors of these men were as infamous as their mythic political careers. Is it any coincidence then that the first constitution of the USSR gave equal legal rights to orphans and illegitimate children? A precedent which was followed in subsequent socialist republics.

You never know what could be lurking unknown in any of our convoluted family histories. You could be sitting on the bus right now or at a 40-40s party with one of the iron curtain's unwanted sons or daughters or someone with a more remarkable past. Who knows? You even might be one.









Heat is a catalyst, something that doesn't last for very long. Somehow we make it away unscathed. Was the tall angular man with the deliberate words just fucking with me? Probably, but I tell everyone I did in fact meet a living relative of the legendary Joseph Stalin.



The next day the cache of prior night's raid is rediscovered intact. The following week goes down as one of the drunkest in history. The likes of Stalin's grandson is never seen again but every once in awhile I catch a glimpse of his leather jacket clad rock 'n roll loving friend at the Blue Danube sliding quarters in the juke box and nursing bottles of PBR.

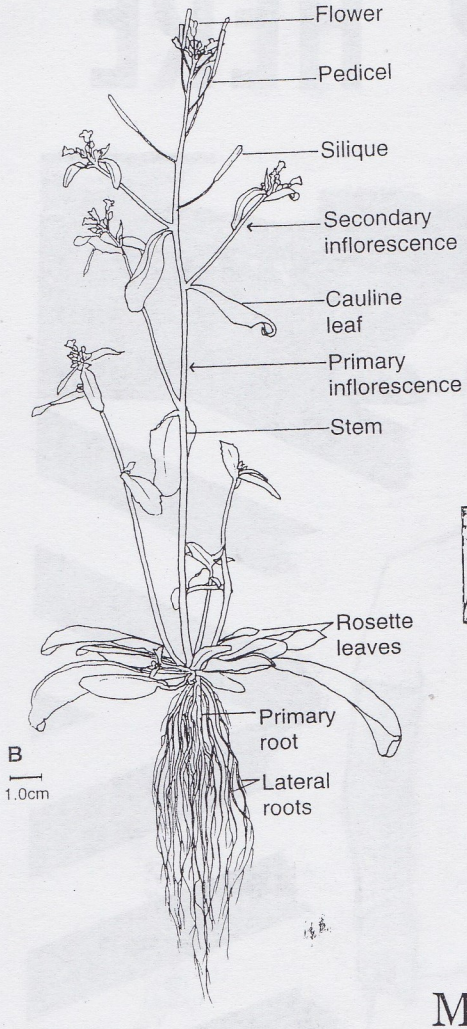
Just wait till you hear about what happened at the next year's 40-40s party.

I'M JUST A ST



STRANGER HERE





SMALL Wheel AT tHE GENOMICS LAB

By Trent Upchurch

My 2006 investment report hit me with the bad news, my biotechnology portfolio had lost 48% of it's worth in a single year. I sat there staring at the piegraph with its dramatic chunk missing and knew that I had to get involved. At this rate, my entire portfolio would be gone in a matter of years, and my dreams of a decadent retirement life would be dashed. So, I quit my food service job and interviewed at the Ohio State's Biotechnology center for an entry-level position at the ABRC (Arabidopsis biological resource center.)

I arrived at Rightmire Hall and had to be let in, since it's a secure building, by Debby, a middle aged woman with curly blond hair. She guided me to her office in the basement of the building, a room with several cubicles and no windows. Photographs of

horses and excruciatingly cute posters of angels were the main decorations of the room. I sat down with Debby and Luz, a red-headed woman with coke-bottle glasses that made her eyes seem popped out from her head, my future bosses. First, they explained to me the work the center did, it was basically a depository that supplied samples of Arabidopsis seeds (a weed that stands about a foot high) that have certain portions of their genome turned off or on. The Arabidopsis was the first organism to have its genome mapped. Now, researchers where working to discover how that genome worked exactly. After going over some of my work history the interview shifted.

"This job is very boring and tedious," Debby said.

"You must stand in a 10° [Celsius] room most of the day," Luz said, "And have very little contact with other workers."

I was taken a bit aback by this, I'd never interviewed for a job that required a warning label. I knew from countless sci-fi films that scientific research is over-wrought with danger, from experiments going out of control and eating a would-be researcher to the shredding of inter-dimensional boundaries and subsequent unleashing of blood-thirsty aliens, but tedium and isolation wasn't exactly was I was prepared for. I had to think fast.

"Um, I like boring. I mean, I have a computer science background." They seemed impressed with my hunger for monotony. I got out my schedule and showed them when I'd be available. Later that day Debby called and hired me as a student research assistant. Step one of my plan to revitalize the biotech industry was a total success. I gladly gave notice at the mirror lake café and after some paper work started in at the ABRC.

On my first day I met James, my manager, though he didn't have more sway than I did with the bosses and I suspect wasn't paid much more than myself. He had grown up a military brat in Europe and graduated high school when he was 16. He had an associate's degree in English and a degree in Biology. James had worked at the ABRC for 6 years, nearly since its inception. James was a Baptist and attended three bible studies a week as well as church every Sunday. Our views were often contrasting, with his love of early romantic poetry, right wing politics and the true light of Christ and my own socialist politics, love of contemporary experimental fiction, and nihilistic worldview.

After a brief tour of the facilities James introduced me to the BTC cold room 029. The room was perhaps 15' by 30' and was lined with white labeled trays. The air intake for the room was in an area that cleaned the corpses of test mice with chlorine. Sometimes the smell would get bad enough that I would be

forced to leave after 20 minutes. I was to stand in this room in my wool jacket and pull seed samples from the trays matching their sample numbers to the numbers given to me on a printed sheet. These were then taken to the "Dry Room" to thaw and be aliqoted, that is, opened and scooped in 25 seed portions into smaller tubes to be shipped to researchers. After the tubes were packaged and mailed the cycle began again.

At first, I was only trusted to pull seed samples from the Cold room and label tubes. About a month into the job I was allowed to aliquot. James showed my how to do it.

"Pick up a tube and check the number," he instructed. "Now make sure all the numbers match." I looked from the tube to the sample tube. "If they do, scoop it and aliquot the sample, make sure that the tube clicks when you close it. You must be positive that the two match. If they don't and you aliquot the sample, it could mean several years of wasted research."

I looked up at James blankly. "Ok, do you want to watch me aliquot a few times, you know? Make sure I'm doing it right."

"No, I have aliquoting to do myself." James said and sat down in his chair and turned up the volume on his DVD player. I learned quickly that my job was just about the same as people with master's degree in biology were doing. The only qualification needed to do the job was a tolerance for the intense boredom of repeating the same task all day.

"Ok," So I set to work. Now I truly felt like I was part of it all, I was slowly peeling away the mysteries of the universe, one seed sample at a time. Then taking those seed samples and returning them to the cold room. Then getting a new list and retrieving a new set, labeling their tubes, aliquoting, wash, rinse, and repeat.

I soon came to relish my 2:30 15 minute coffee breaks, which soon turned into 20 to 30 minute breaks. At first I would take my breaks with in the DNA office (the ABRC had two divisions: seeds and DNA) where I'd made friends with Natalie, a girl that was about my age that listened to Sleater Kinney and Bikini Kill. After doing this for several days Luz confronted me about it.

"Trent!" This was often the greeting at the ABRC, just shouting each other's names.

"Luz!"

"Trent! I have been told by the DNA section that you have been taking your coffee break in their office." Luz said in her Peruvian accent.

I nodded and looked into Luz's glasses to see her comically boggled eyes.

"They have told me that this is not working, that the break times do not match up and that you are distracting the

other employees. So now, you must take your coffee breaks in the lobby next to the elevator." She guided me to the lobby area and showed me the coffee maker. "So, now you will take your breaks here. Not in the DNA center." Luz had a special way of repeating herself several times. At first I thought it was because English was her second language and she was worried that she wasn't communicating clearly, but after several repeated confirmations it seemed she just had a penchant for repeating herself.

"Your break will take place in this area. Here is where you will drink Coffee. Not in the DNA center."

"Ok, I got it Luz."

"It's not that the DNA center does not like you. You must not think this Trent. It's just that the breaks don't match up. You must not think that they don't like you."

"Ok, Luz."

Later that week I saw Natalie from the DNA center.

"I heard that you don't like me." I said

"What?"

"Luz said that the DNA center doesn't like me and that I'm not allowed to take my breaks down there anymore."

"We never said anything, that's just Luz. She likes to do stuff like that. Just to let you know she's still your boss," my first encounter with Luz's psychotic control side. It would not be the last time. The science industry had a dark underbelly inhabited by an ego-maniacal Peruvian named Luz.

A few days after this was sitting in the main area of the office talking with James while Luz worked in her office, her door open to the main area. After a few minutes of chatting, Luz came out of her office and stood next to both of us.

"You must stop talking, I cannot concentrate," She said. "I am trying to do work in my office and cannot concentrate with the sound of your voices."

I looked past her to the open door of her office. "Ok, Luz", I said and when she'd gone back to her office I gave James an incredulous look, *is she serious?*

A few months after this Luz would throw a 20 minute tantrum over another worker spraying cling-guard on her chair. Soon after this Luz banned any non-science publications from the employee break room.

The dream was dying. My enthusiasm for the job was shot and my hope for reviving the biotech industry sputtered and died. I was just paying the rent now, checking the clock obsessively hoping for that magical hour of 4:30 to come around. My attitude toward working here seemed endemic to all the workers. No one wanted this job; it was simply convenient place that paid ok. Everyone just got used to the ennui and turned up their

headphones. We all had our own secret pleasures of working at the ABRC; mine included being alone in the cold room, singing along to my mix tapes while imagining scenes where Luz's desire for control hit new levels. My most memorable creation stemmed from a power struggle that went on amongst the leaders of the lab regarding a new payment scheme. I imagined Luz would come up to me in the cafeteria and hand me a bowl in an attempt to win me over to her side.

"Here Trent, it's for you," she said.

"Thanks, Luz," I looked into the bowl and found it filled with dead bees before I could do anything she sucker punched me in the kidneys.

The mental and physical wear on the employees was depressing to behold. Since the seeds had to be treated with different chemicals a lot of the greenhouse workers would get sick periodically from exposure. James had worked there the longest and often talked about quitting. A few times I week I would find him in the dry room slumped forward with his head on his desk, one arm wrapped around his head the other one pounding on the desktop.

When summer started I became a full time employee. Or rather, I wrote down that I worked 8 hours every day, but between breaks and showing up late it was more like 6 and a half hours. This ratio was actually better than the other student employees maintained and I never really felt bad about lying on my time card. In fact when I was hired the secretary had told if me if I was "chivalrous" with my time card I wasn't going to get paid. I noticed she often showed up after I did.

I soon discovered that if I came into work hung-over it was yet another distraction from the mind-numbing boredom of the office. So, soon I made friends with Scotty and together we fell into an after work ritual. I'd get home and meet him; we'd go to mass at St. Francis of Assisi then giant eagle and each buy a $2.39 bottle of Joshua Hill. The only variation was deciding between Shiraz and Merlot. Yum.

After downing the bottles we'd put on our favorite record, Immortal Ayatollah – "The Jihad Has Just Begun" , sing along to our favorite jams: *Exterminate The Occident, Deadmocracy, George Bush Is A Transsexual Robot* and *From Anal Dissection To Orgasmic Anti-Christian Mass Murder* and do our best to throw enough spin kicks to make the ayatollah proud.

I was waiting for the ax to fall. On a typical day I could be found leaning in the hallway next to the cold room resting and taking drinks from the fountain or in the dry room with my head on my desk, sleeping. What was taking so long, couldn't they see my

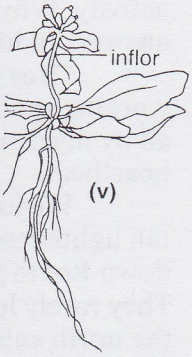
incompetence? One day when I woke up the morning before I was so inebriated that I put on two different shoes and had to spend the day with my legs placed strategically around corners. Not that anyone noticed. It was strange how the repetition of the same action changed the way you think. You no longer saw details, everything moved in iterations. My own mental monologue being replaced by a stream of numbers, similar to the lists we had to pull: 18478, 19765, 21345, 32540, 56780...

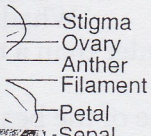
In the end I didn't get fired. I started going back to school and working part time again. This eased the experience of the ABRC. When winter came I switched jobs to being a computer lab monitor for the English department and abandoned the Genomics industry. I resigned my investments to wither and fade. Biotech, it seemed was beyond any man's ability to save. I simply formulated a new retirement plan: I'm hit by a car and never recover from my wounds.

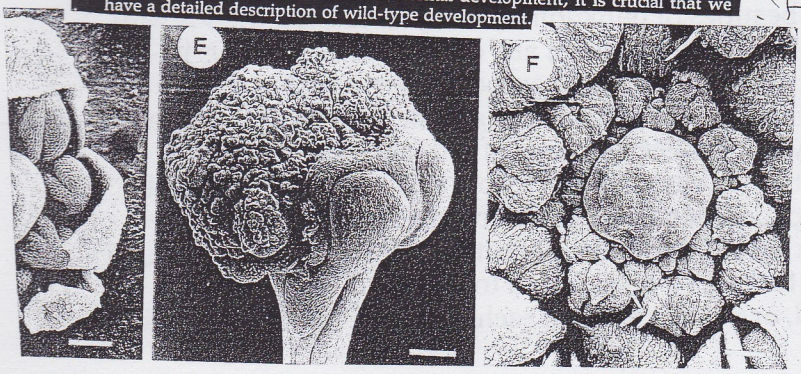
Genetics and Development

Over two centuries ago, Goethe (1790) noted the value of mutants, or in his term, "*retrograde* metamorphosis," in elucidating the mechanisms by which living organisms develop: "From our acquaintance with this abnormal metamorphosis, we are enabled to unveil the secrets that normal metamorphosis conceals from us, and to see distinctly what, from the regular course of development, we can only infer." However, it was not until early in the twentieth century, following the rediscovery of Mendel's work, that the disciplines of genetics and developmental biology were united. This was in part due to Thomas Hunt Morgan's conclusion that the problems of experimental embryology were intractable, and his move into genetics in the hope that it would illuminate the problems of development; this has been referred to as Morgan's Deviation. In the next thirty years much progress was made in the field of genetics. However, due to the lack of knowledge of the molecular basis of inheritance, there remained a gulf in understanding between the nature of the gene and development: "Between the characters that are used by the geneticist and the genes that his theory postulates lies the whole field of embryonic development, where the properties implicit in the genes become explicit in . . . the cells." (Morgan, 1934).

The gap between gene and metamorphosis has been partially bridged with the advent of molecular genetics, as the ability to purify and sequence DNA has allowed the relationship to be examined at the molecular level. In large part, molecular genetic studies rely on well-characterized organisms that are easily manipulated. In the domain of flowering plants, the small cruciferous weed *Arabidopsis thaliana* has become a model system for many molecular genetic investigations of plant development, including pattern formation, physiology, biochemistry, and plant–pathogen interactions. However, before mutants can "unveil the secrets" of normal development, it is crucial that we have a detailed description of wild-type development.









I call at about midnight to see if anyone is still awake. Done studying for the night and needing a change of scenery. Still not tired and in need of new activity. Why can't I just be tired like everyone else? Barry answers in his nervous yet weary voice.

"Hey man, ya wanna go dumpstering? The truck is working again." The first thing that he asks, not taken aback at all by my disregard for people's bedtimes. I'm over in a heartbeat.

We jump into his old Dodge and blaze into the night, red tail lights resembling Hale Bop. Loud rock music screaming down Route 315. It's good to have friends who are insomniacs. They rarely let you down. We trace the well worn circle around the north suburbs of Columbus hitting all the X's on our treasure map. Kroger's on Olentangy, Big Lots, Trader Joes, GFS, Einstein Brother's, Aldi. By the time our starlight pilgrimage brings us to the final stop I'm finally falling asleep in the cab next to Barry. Not even Nippon's spikiest hardcore punks, DSB, blasting out of the tinny speakers with my mate screeching along can keep me awake. He giggles and nudges me,

"Whadaya think you're doing?" Screaming into my ear louder than a thousand Gibson SGs.

One of the beauties of punkdom is that you become friends with people you'd never befriend in any other kind of life. This is especially true in the far flung outposts that don't have scene reports in the pages of MRR. Haling from the hills of Southeast Ohio, Barry is a perfect synthesis of redneck and crust punk. Moving to the big city to recover from pills and women, equally devastating addictions, our paths crossed. What's better? His peace punk record or his gun collection? I'm not sure. But what I do know is that he's a good friend to have and somehow we understand, or at least tolerate each other. I'll ignore the rumors

about how far he'll go for a joke; crawling military style across the front yard in camo fatigues in the middle of the night with his assault rifle's laser sight trained on Evan's bedroom window for twenty minutes and then going home and not telling a soul. Somehow I found out. Fucking insomniacs. They don't call him Barry McScary for nothing.

Barry pulls the old Dodge to the front of the dumpster with a howling jolt. The grill nearly touching the lip of the open lid. Who does he think he is? The Dukes of Hazard? We jump out unspeaking, the drill well worn into our heads. I notice one little spud lying all alone on the asphalt. I go over and pick it up, placing it cutely on the hood of the truck.

"Lookee here, I got a tater!" I holler as if I've caught a toad.

We lean over the gaping maw of the green metal receptacle where we do our "shopping" and look at each other in unison, without speaking. Lost in a moment of zen we look back inside one more time. In mutual disbelief or something of joyous agony Barry and I erupt in hysteric laughter. The Aldi dumpster is filled to the peak with sacks of Idaho potatoes.

From 1845 to 1849 Ireland suffered a series of famines that devastated its staple crop, the potato. Potato blight, also known as Phytophthora, is caused by an Oomycete, a plant damaging pathogen resembling fungus but classified under a different kingdom all together- Stranenophila. Many factors contributed to the damage the blight had on the people of Ireland. The British plantation system instituted after Oliver Cromwell's victory confiscated almost all of Catholic-owned lands, throwing the population into poverty. The Irish tradition of splitting familial lands between male heirs and Catholic reproduction practices put a strain on available land for families to subsist off of. Dependency on the potato as a primary food source by the lower classes and the export of food produced on lands of the wealthy created conditions for disaster. Policies of British rule during the tragedy were misguided; ill informed and often times consciously negligent. Often referred to as a "holocaust," various estimates suggest 500,000 to a million people, or 7.12% of the population, perished as a result of hunger and disease. We count 70 sacks of potatoes thrown into Barry's pick-up. At 10 pounds a piece we score near 700 lbs of potatoes from the night's gleaning. With what we find, we quite possibly could have saved Ireland.

Peasant's staff of light, amazing spud, apple of the earth. These are all titles of the most amazing plant one can eat that grows from the earth. The Spanish Conquistadors were the first

Europeans to encounter this unimposing plant that the Indians called "papa." Led by Francisco Pizarro they overran what would be Peru in the 1530s. In their mad lust for gold the conquistadors were unaware of the buried treasure under their iron-clad feet. In hot pursuit of the Incan patriarch Atahualpa and his fabled wealth they rode roughshod over the papa. Introduced to Europe over the next 50 years, the potato has outlasted four centuries of world conquest. The Inca Empire has vanished, Spain's glory only a memory but King Potato still reigns. Compared to the vast benefits this versatile plant has bestowed upon humankind, all the gold of Peru is but small potatoes.

Today the potato is produced in 130 of the world's 167 countries. One year's crop, at consumer prices, is worth 106 billion dollars, more than the value of all the gold and silver the Spanish ever carted out of the New World. The world average annual crop, 1291 million tons, could carpet a four lane superhighway circling the Earth six times. This miracle plant is so hardy and adaptable that it grows below sea level behind Dutch dikes to 1,400 feet up in the chilly Andes and Himalayas, from the Arctic Circle to the Straight of Magellan, in the screeching deserts of Australia and Africa, to sultry jungles of South America, where high humidity encourages withering and other diseases ravages food crops does the potato flourish.

MORE CRUCIAL FACTS



John Dillinger, the legendary bankrobber, reportedly carved one into a pistol, dyed it with iodine and escaped from prison.



In India, a jack of all trades is known as an "alu," which is you know what they call there.



The potato is so nutritious that a man in Scandinavia lived healthy for 300 days on only spuds dressed with a bit of margarine



Potatoes are 99.9% fat free.

Who knows why all that food was thrown away that night? Salmonella outbreak forcing an industry wide recall? Slowness of sales resulting in the beginnings of spoil in those sacks? We will never know. I still eat them and end up fine. The soulless profit driven mediation of food distribution in the hands of a market economy is an affront to the generations of poor Irish that starved. I wish there was someway I could send them into the past, with a time machine perhaps, to the starving orphans of the famine.

To right the past, I intended to see to the present and make sure as many of those potatoes are eaten. I call up everyone I know the next day to come to Barry's house and pick up some sacks from the mound of starch and carbohydrates nested in the bed of his pickup. Nobody ever comes and the ghosts of the Irish famine cry throughout history and into my dreams for many nights that follow. Barry, whose last name denotes that of an Irish lineage, could do little but watch those potatoes turn black and soggy like they did during those bitter years in the 1840s. In penance, the next couple weeks I make a different potato dish to eat every night, never repeating a recipe once.

ABOUT POTATOS:



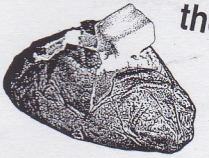
7 pounds of potatos, about 23, is total to 2,500 calories, the approximate adult requirement for a day



An acre of potatoes yields almost as much food as 2 acres of grain.

They provide half the daily vitamin C for an adult according to the FDA, a fact that sea captains in the age of sail were privy to, preventing scurvy among their crews.

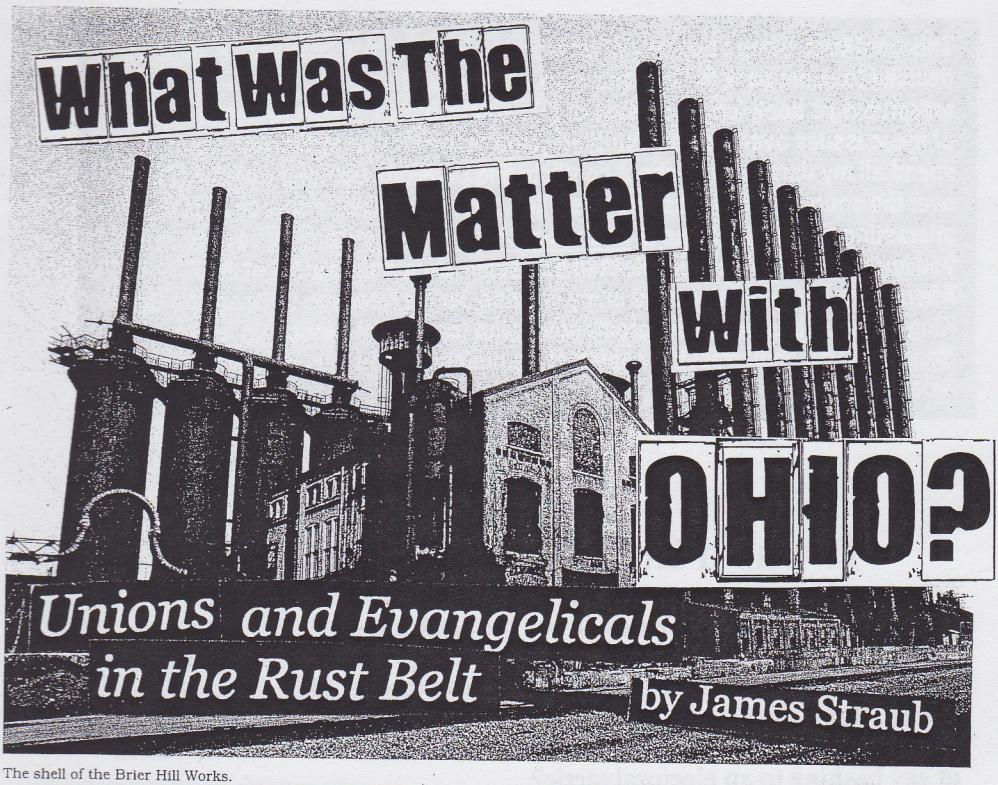




Nutritionists rate their quality higher than that of the soybean.

After a while Barry goes back home to his partner and pills, but I continue the midnight routine, arcing across the suburbs of Columbus. My new dumpstering buddy, who provides a car, is Ben. A new housemate of mine, a maladjusted local who practices free jazz drumming at least four hours a day. Another hungry soul who somehow I become friends with through the vague intricacies of punkdom. When not transforming into the best percussionist in town he can be found with me in the trash of wasteful corporations in an attempt to provide for our kin or at least redress the wrongs of excess. You got a car, I got the time, motivation and some gas money. It's a simple solution. I never thought growing up I'd make friends from wanting to eat out of the trash. I never thought I'd live like this but its better than anything of the other trade offs out there. The police who tell us that this is illegal, but I think it's more of a crime to waste such a beautiful plant. Especially when there are so many hungry people around us. Some may think that choosing to eat trash is stupid or that it means you're poor, but my life feels richer than most of those I see out there with the fancy things. Around our loop across the northern suburbs, I've learned that no one really fits into these stereotypes of wealth, success or happiness we make for each under closer examination. Least of all what it is to be "punk." Not Barry, Not Ben, not me. What seems simple at first, like the potato, is a world in itself.

With my new companion we listen to the BBC news loop at midnight on NPR instead of mind numbing hardcore. We discuss the logistics of fedexing boxes to all the starving people in Sudan and Somalia described on the radio with the abundance that we can't possibly eat. Some way to redistribute the decadence and waste of first-world corporations that is too much for even us to live off. Perhaps we'll figure out a way to e-mail people food across the world instantly, some version of an attachment file, like Charley Bucket did with candy bars through WonkaVision in "Willy Wonka and the Incredible Chocolate Factory." In this fucked up existence the earth's most nourishing artifact is most easily discovered in the trash and not out of the spiritually satisfying work of cultivating one's own life's energy from seed to plate. It's no use to lament the privilege we receive for randomly being born into a decadent wasteful stratum of society, but we can try to spread it around. So if you're hungry, stop on by my house, there's more than any of us can eat. There's gold in them dumpsters and I can make wonders out of a potato, not that they aren't already.



The shell of the Brier Hill Works.

When I first moved to Ohio in November 2004, George Bush had just held onto power by winning the electoral votes of this state. Even leaving aside the question of how the most hated man in the world got re-elected at all, how the hell did he pull one over on *Ohio*, I wondered. Bush had helped put the last nails in the coffin of the state's economy personally; why would a bunch of unemployed ex-steelworkers, nurse aides and waitresses with poverty-level paychecks, vote for the prep-school douchebag who'd sent their kids to kill and die in the desert on a lie for his oil buddies? I had come to Ohio to work for a healthcare workers union, to hopefully help rebuild a labor movement of ordinary folks to ensure that pigs like Bush become bacon instead of emperor. Over the next year I had a lot of time driving around Youngstown and Cincinnati talking to nurses and STNAs to dwell on the forces in our history, economy and beliefs that brought so many good people in America to support the evil bastards who screwed our cities, jobs and lives.

I used to do a zine. But now that I had a real job, had learned to drive a car and even wore a tie every day, I hung up my kinkos cards. Instead I found an outlet writing articles for progressive magazines. I wrote the following article for a lefty journal called Monthly Review, summing up what I felt I'd learned in my year in Ohio. Brian asked to reprint it to provide a little high-fiber substance (i.e. boring senior citizen filler) for this Griot. I'm honored to oblige. As he is the coordinator of the punk temp labor/ housing agency that keeps me alive these days, I'm in no position to turn him down.

This past year, when I burned out on working for the union over in Las Vegas, I decided to come back to Ohio and work on a big writing project. I'm now researching a book-length version of this article, blown out to chart the history of these issues over the past hundred years in the industrial Midwest. I now spend all my time reading about conflicts and divisions between working people, over the course of the class struggle-filled century of steel. If this sounds interesting to you, email me at rustbeltjacobin@gmail.com and I'll be sure to let you know when the book is released sometime around the spring of 2037. Alternately, if you're interested in my old zine, let me refer you to Brian, the Don King of Columbus punk zine promotions, who for a small all-markup fee will gladly sell you embarrassing copies of my pretentious 16 year-olds diary, called Ride On.

It was a fittingly ironic end to an election full of grotesque twists: When George W. Bush was narrowly reelected president of the United States, it was the electoral votes of the state he had harmed most that gave him the final nudge across the finish line. Ohio went for the second election in a row to the Republican clown prince. But if the first Bush victory was tragedy, the one in 2004 was surely farce: has world history ever turned before on the artful elevation of gay bashing to an electoral tactic?

"In twenty-one years of organizing, I've never seen anything like this," former trucker's union organizer Phil Burress told the *New York Times* shortly after the election. "It's a forest fire with a 100 mile-per-hour wind behind it." Burress was speaking not of the efforts of unions and community organizations to register and turn out hundreds of thousands of new voters to the polls in Ohio to vote against Bush, but of his crusade to mobilize even larger numbers to pass a state constitution amendment prohibiting gay marriage.

The demographics and causes of Bush's slim victory in Ohio and the country continue to be debated—for instance, while 25 percent of Ohio voters identified themselves as white evangelicals (and 78 percent of them voted for Bush), the *Washington Post's* number-crunching later revealed that the percentage of frequent church-goers voting in Ohio actually *declined* 5 percent in 2004—and Congressman John Conyers has documented evidence of electoral fraud that indicates Ohio my have been this election's secret Florida. However, it remains undeniable that Bush's Ohio victory did come in part from a massive outpouring of socially conservative evangelical Christians to the polls. A large majority of these Republican evangelicals were blue-collar Ohioans voting against their self-interest, many mobilized by Burress's anti-gay marriage amendment.

Karl Rove's savvy manipulation of opposition to same-sex marriage was mirrored, however, by a far stranger picture at the state level in Ohio. The amendment, which also prohibits legal recognition of any domestic partnership short of marriage, was widely expected to drive even more of Ohio's young people (and even businesses) away from the state—further hurting the state's economy—and thus it was *opposed* by most of the state's top Republican politicians and corporations. Ohio's Republican senators, governor, and attorney general, plus the state's Chamber of Commerce, all attempted to halt Burress's homophobic firestorm—with no success. Few voters realized the amendment would strip health benefits from even unmarried heterosexual domestic partners.

The evangelical churches organized one of the most energetic grassroots political campaigns in state history. With the enthusiastic support of just a few prominent right-wing politicians, like Ohio's black, evangelical secretary of state Ken Blackwell, the amendment against same-sex marriage easily won an electoral majority of 62 percent. Among white workers over forty without a college degree (who make up a majority of this mostly blue-collar state's electorate), the amendment did particularly well.

This working-class twist on the election immediately led to one left-leaning pundit's stock going through the roof: Thomas Frank, who had diagnosed the malady earlier in 2004 in his book, *What's the Matter with Kansas?* The book ponders the rise of a solid Republican majority in Kansas, which was once the incubator of American populism. After election day, Frank's book became required reading for endangered and desperate American liberals. However, while Frank's detailed case study grounded the book's insights in a fascinating microcosm, it is worth remembering that Kansas itself is far from the most pressing political battlefield in the country. Kansas is part of the solidly Republican heartland, and it will likely remain so for the foreseeable future. However important rebuilding the left in the heartland may be in the long term, neither that state nor its neighbors will soon be a decisive electoral battleground. Rather, as polls regularly show, the region holding back the floodtide of indefinite Republican supremacy is the northern Midwest, Great Lakes region—otherwise known as the rust belt. And the dike is about to burst.

By any pundit's math, the grim truth of the 2004 election was that Bush was threatening Kerry in many more "blue" states than was true for Kerry threats in the "red" states. The states in the entire northern Midwest rust belt—Minnesota, Wisconsin, Iowa, Michigan, and Ohio, a list that sounds like a roll call of states that benefited most from Franklin D. Roosevelt's New Deal—all stood within a percentage point of being swept by Republicans, continuing a trend of becoming inexorably red. Meanwhile, the poorest state of the rust belt, and long the most militantly Democratic, West Virginia, has gone entirely over to the dark side, with Bush winning by a shattering 13 percent. If

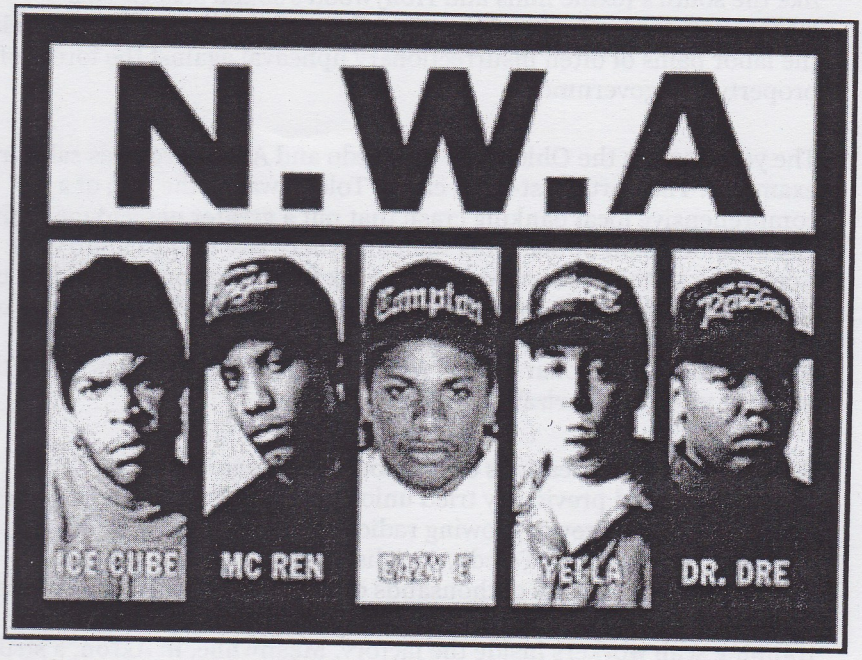
Republicans begin to win decisive West Virginia–style majorities in the rest of the Great Lakes region, they can become a permanent ruling party—able finally to legislate away what remains of the public sector, unions, reproductive freedom, and minority rights. The pressing question to be asked, from a tactical last-stand standpoint, is this: What's the matter with the rust belt?

To take Ohio, specifically—well, what *isn't* the matter with Ohio, these days? Throughout Bush's first term, the state constantly vied with Michigan for the dubious honor of most jobs lost. The hundreds of thousands of manufacturing jobs lost since 2000 were largely high-wage, stable, union jobs, which served as employment multipliers in the larger local economy. For every plate glass factory or tractor plant that shuts its gates, a locally owned grocery or barbershop goes out of business too. Though poverty has been endemic to Ohio since the great steel shutdowns began in the late 1970s, on Bush's watch Cleveland officially became the poorest city in America (with Toledo several spots behind). And with General Motors on the brink of bankruptcy, the state may be on the verge of another great crash in industrial employment.

Anonymous blue-collar towns like Canton, Springfield, and Akron continued to bleed jobs and people, while former steel capital Youngstown has lost more than half of its 1950 population. Local teens there, savvier about American political economy than most credentialed cultural critics, call their town "Yompton"—in reference to the urban devastation of Compton, California as famously depicted in NWA's hip-hop album, *Straight Outta Compton*. The comparison is telling—as the state continues to deindustrialize, African-Americans bear the brunt, stranded as an underclass in every dying urban core. Indeed, in the past decade Ohio has exhibited symptoms of a genuine 1960s-style racial crisis, with the second-longest prison uprising in America (at Southern Ohio Correctional Facility in Lucasville, 1993) and a major race rebellion sparked by police brutality (in Cincinnati, 2001).

The Compton of NWA, of course, weathers its woes in a different statewide context than any Youngstown or Akron. For Ohio lacks significant taxable resources—the Mahoning Valley is no Silicon Valley, and there is no housing bubble of note there. A list of today's boom industries (biotechnology, energy, computers, and tourism) reads like a list of things Ohio largely or wholly lacks. And with few economic opportunities mixing with the state's Midwestern patriotism, Ohio's blue-collar towns and small cities bear a disproportionate share of the burden of their president's imperial adventures. The Ohio-based Third Marine Battalion, for example, has had forty-seven soldiers die in Iraq as of this past summer, seventeen of whom died riding in an unarmored vehicle. The lives of mere leathernecks from the rust belt are not quite as expendable as those of Iraqi civilians to the neoconservative world-shapers safely hunkered down in air-conditioned Green Zones, but then

again, what's a few less laid-off Ohioans to Paul Wolfowitz? Indeed, such deaths are as close as Bush has come to decreasing Ohio's unemployment figures.



This landscape of poverty and brutality is all the more bitter for Ohio, since it was the sweat and blood of places like this that originally made the American Dream a reality for many people. In countless coal mines, steel mills, and industrial factories, Ohioans have prided themselves on doing the arduous work of actually producing the goods many saw as American prosperity—and in just as many strikes and struggles, assuring that those who produced would also have a share of the wealth. For as long as Ohio has been an industrial megalopolis, workers there have been contentiously demanding their rights and their share. Since the mid-nineteenth century, working people in Ohio organized, struck, fought, and even rioted—from machinists in Dayton to streetcar operators in Columbus, on rails up north and in dockyards down south. A frequent epicenter of both class conflict and labor organizing, ragtime Ohio hosted the founding conventions of labor federations as diverse as the large, conservative American Federation of Labor, the early industrial United Mineworkers of America, and even the short-lived, Communist-led Trade Union Unity League. Workers' struggles in the state produced socialist mayors in towns like Lima and Lorain, outright mobs in Cincinnati and Toledo, and intermittent unionization everywhere a worker drew a paycheck.

It was not until the 1930s, however, when a structural disaster in American capitalism (the Great Depression) coincided with a new form of labor organization—wholesale industrial organization of the mass

production industries—and workers in Ohio changed not just their paychecks but the world. Mass unionization swept outwards from the Great Lakes region, all the way to traditional anti-union strongholds like the south's textile mills and Hollywood's sound stages. This Depression-era birth of an "American Dream" social contract came via the labor pains of often insurrectionary upheaval against the forces of property and government.

The year 1934 in the Ohio cities of Toledo and Akron provides salutary examples. The northwest-Ohio city of Toledo was in the grip of a comprehensive local banking crash that put a greater percentage of the city's residents on public relief than anywhere else in the country. Across the state in Akron, widespread tax fraud by property-holders cut the city's revenue base so drastically that public schools were forced to close their doors, while the city's huge rubber companies protected their multimillion-dollar annual profits by enforcing wage cuts with the outright violent terrorization of their workers.

Such draconian expressions of top-down class war confronted local workers who had previously tried union organization and strikes, only to fail bitterly. However, growing radical movements in both cities refused to cry uncle. In Toledo, socialist organizers were key in mobilizing large crowds of thousands of unemployed to join picketers on strike outside an auto plant—battling the National Guard and trapping scab workers inside the factory. Meanwhile, in Akron, a strike of rubber workers resulted in the spontaneous invention of the "sit-down" strike, where workers occupied their factory, thus threatening the bosses with the destruction of expensive equipment in the event of violence. In both Toledo and Akron, such tactics—support from mass crowds and "sit-down" factory occupation—heralded their use in hundreds of successive labor battles. They also resulted in victories that gave unions a foothold in the new mass-production industries: collective bargaining at the Auto-Lite plant in Toledo, and industrial union recognition at the Akron rubber plants. In imitation, workers at a Cleveland General Motors plant several years later began an angry sit-down strike that sparked a multi-state wave of workplace occupations that culminated in the victorious Flint GM sit-down—the victory that unionized GM and paved the way for a social contract in American workplaces.

Despite all this left-led industrial conflict, Ohio never developed the kind of mass counterculture or the left-wing third parties that unions birthed in places like New York City or Wisconsin. Instead, Ohio's class struggles simply gave the state an exceptionally blue-collar self-identity and left pockets of radical workers scattered across its industrial hinterlands. This is the ideologically varied class sentiment that brought modern Ohio such diverse populists as Dayton talk-show host Phil Donahue, Cleveland left-wing politician Dennis Kucinich, Youngstown's flamboyant oddball James Traficant, and Cincinnati's

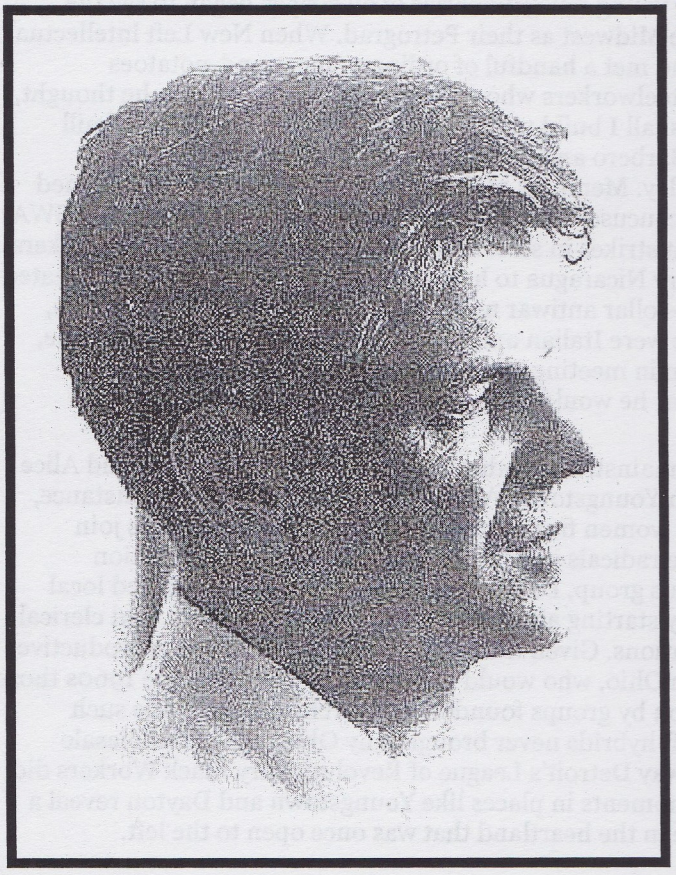
Jerry Springer (a little bit of all the above). As a state that was heavily industrialized and unionized, but always seen as a bit of a cultureless manufacturing backwater, Ohio, like neighbors Michigan and West Virginia, has remained a singularly working-class place, with deep reservoirs of economic resentment.

It was this smoldering blue-collar spirit that brought a trickle of New Left radicals to Ohio in the late 1960s and early 1970s. Searching for white working-class support for rebellion during America's Vietnam-era upheavals, young revolutionaries of all stripes began to see the factories of the Midwest as their Petrograd. When New Left intellectual Staughton Lynd met a handful of ordinary, meat-and-potatoes Youngstown steelworkers who were also anti-war radicals, he thought, "On this rock shall I build my church," and teamed with local "mill hunks" John Barbero and Ed Mann to build a labor left in the Mahoning Valley. Members of their Worker's Solidarity Club formed rank-and-file caucuses in the United Steel Workers of America (USWA) and led wildcat strikes in steel mills; sent electricians and steelworkers to revolutionary Nicaragua to help build similar industries; and created a vibrant blue-collar antiwar movement (steelworker John Barbero, whose parents were Italian and Czech and whose wife was Japanese, used to explain in meetings that he was antiwar because in any conceivable war he would have to fight a relative).

Nor was such mainstream radicalism confined to Staughton and Alice Lynd's work in Youngstown. Across the state in Dayton, for instance, the 1960s saw women from progressive churches and unions join counterculture radicals in a prominent local women's liberation movement. This group, Dayton Women's Liberation, achieved local prominence by starting abortion clinics, women's centers, and clerical labor organizations. Given the fundamentalist assault on reproductive rights today in Ohio, who would guess that in Dayton in the 1960s those rights were won by groups founded by churchwomen! While such labor-New Left hybrids never brought any Ohio cities to wholesale rebellion the way Detroit's League of Revolutionary Black Workers did, such radical moments in places like Youngstown and Dayton reveal a political space in the heartland that was once open to the left.

Yet this small door would slam shut in the 1980s, and not just from the general rightward shift of the time. Deindustrialization itself did as much or more to terminate the Ohio left. In Youngstown, after years of being the rank-and-file opposition in their steelworkers' union, radicals John Barbero and Ed Mann assembled a winning coalition of black and progressive white steelworkers to win the presidency of their steelworkers' local in 1973. But shortly after they had been reelected in 1976, the Youngstown Sheet and Tube Company announced plans to close the great Brief Hill steelworks. Barbero and Mann (along with the

Lynds and their fledgling Youngstown labor-left group) fought a brave and innovative campaign to stop the shutdown, but they were ultimately unsuccessful. Far from leading a revolution by halting steel production at a key moment, radicals saw the company cease steel production on its own, in the face of cheaper imports and lower wage competition abroad—leaving Mann to spend his remaining years haunting the bankruptcy courts of Youngstown, continuing to courageously protest the foreclosures and evictions of laid-off steelworkers from their American Dream.



Ohio native and prolific leftist author Staughton Lynd in his younger years.

The economic catastrophes of the 1980s laid waste not just to the seeds of a new labor left, but also to Ohio's cities and industrial areas. In Cleveland, where the labor-left politician Dennis Kucinich had become the youngest mayor in America, plant shutdowns and white flight destroyed the city's resource base, causing social chaos easily blamed on the radical kid mayor. The local banking elite, eager for a confrontation with Kucinich, ordered him to privatize the city's electric utility. He refused, and the banks called his bluff by calling the city's loans into default. In the ensuing economic meltdown, Kucinich lost his reelection bid, making local government safe for capitalism again.

Ohio's cities, manufacturing industries, and unions have been on life support ever since. The old interlocking forms of New Deal social democracy—urban machine/social safety net/unionized mass-production industry—are on a terminal slide to extinction. As all over America, they are gradually being replaced by a new comprehensive social organization—nonunion Wal-Mart jobs/antisocial exurban sprawl/hyper-individualist consumerism—whose value system is as oriented towards the Republican right as the old New Deal was to FDR Democrats. In this equation, the role of ideological prime movers has switched: just as left-wing CIO unions used to be the instigators and organizers of the discontent that created the rest of the social structure, now it is the equally (but oppositely) ideological evangelical churches that stoke the fires of blue-collar anger in Ohio. Wal-Mart has replaced the steel companies as the state's largest employer; the sprawling exurbs of Columbus and Cincinnati have replaced Cleveland as its fastest growing areas; and the Assemblies of God and Church of the Nazarene are the new Steelworkers and Autoworkers.

Ohio has always been a devout place—there are more Methodist churches than post offices in the state. However, as all over the country, more liberal, old, mainline denominations like the Methodists have lost parishioners just as the industrial cities have bled jobs. Taking their place is a mass movement of largely fundamentalist, right-wing Protestant churches—the born again, or evangelical, movement. And while not every born-again Christian is a fundamentalist or a conservative, there is no denying that this conservative evangelical movement is leading to both a growth in adherents and a shift to the right for mainstream Christianity. Such churches operate as a more decentralized network than their proprietary forefathers, and their common denominator is not just traditionalist social conservatism. It is a missionary zeal for spreading the word, recruiting in large numbers, and developing members' emotional commitment and ability to further proselytize. This is, by the way, a classic grassroots organizing model, one that is unused not just by the dwindling mainline churches, but also by the dying industrial unions and the left in general. Stepping assertively into a vacuum of grassroots organization in so many communities, evangelical churches have flexed awesome political muscle, and they have become the political foot soldiers of a far-right Republican new world order in the same way unions used to secure the New Deal. In an episode of the television show *Frontline* about Karl Rove's Republican organization, Dana Millbank of the *Washington Post* said, "Now, where Karl's interest is, is in the mechanics of this. And I think it's fair to say that religious conservatives, evangelical churches, have become sort of the new labor unions."

While it may appear that evangelical traditionalism has cleanly stepped in to fill a void in working-class organizations left by the decline of both unions and the urban-industrial social contract, the reality is more complex. Evangelicals, even Pentecostal Holiness churches, are no

longer the singularly working-class religion they once were. The fortunes of some 1970s evangelicals were boosted greatly by the Texas oil boom and the economic growth of the Sun Belt—creating the conservative *nouveau riche* that work in the energy industries, pray in the fundamentalist churches, and run for office in the Republican Party. The growth of industries in suburban sprawl, armaments, agribusiness, and energy has a symbiotic relationship with other social meta-processes, like the move from rust belt to sun belt, the decline of urban cores and growth of exurbs, and de-unionization. Superprofits in those sectors, meanwhile, fatten more Republican campaign coffers; through conservative movement groups and church collection plates, they provide the resource base for the organizing work evangelicals do. The evangelical churches could thus be seen as a cross-class movement where super-profits in Republican-dominated industries are tithed out to fund sophisticated grassroots organizing by the fundamentalist cadre.

The presence of this kind of money allows these churches, especially the enormous megachurches that dominate the political landscape of America's burgeoning exurbs, to provide the kind of material social programs the New Deal once stood for. As Barbara Ehrenreich pointed out in an article on the religious welfare state earlier this year,

[At] McLean Bible Church, spiritual home of Senator James Inhofe and other prominent right-wingers...dozens of families and teenagers enjoy a low-priced dinner in the cafeteria; a hundred unemployed people meet for prayer and job tips at the "Career Ministry"; divorced and abused women gather in support groups. Among its many services, MBC distributes free clothing to 10,000 poor people a year, helped start an inner-city ministry for at-risk youth in DC and operates a "special needs" ministry for disabled children.

While McLean is an archetypal exurb megachurch, Ehrenreich notes that also

many smaller evangelical churches offer a similar array of services—childcare, after-school programs, ESL lessons, help in finding a job, not to mention the occasional cash handout. A woman I met in Minneapolis gave me her strategy for surviving bouts of destitution: "First, you find a church." A trailer-park dweller in Grand Rapids told me that he often turned to his church for help with the rent. Got a drinking problem, a vicious spouse, a wayward child, a bill due? Find a church.[1]

What separates these evangelical social programs from those of liberal churches or even resources provided by the left is that they implicitly and explicitly harness loyalties to the Republican Party, which seeks to destroy the hard-won public sector that is supposed to provide such safety nets in the first place. Of course, here the Republicans are well-aided by the Democratic Party, which no longer even pretends to legislate for such material gains. With the pro-business Democratic

Leadership Council firmly in control of the party, anything that smacks of old New Deal social spending is jettisoned for vain appeals to the copious cash (and few votes) of the entertainment, finance, and information industries.

The economic benefits of evangelical faith, however, are not the prime motivators for most peoples' church membership. In an essay challenging the idea that liberal evangelicals like Jim Wallis can offer the devout a progressive version of their religion, radical former fundamentalist Roxeanne Dunbar-Ortiz points out that the current evangelical movement was born first as a mixture of Protestant fundamentalism and Cold-War anticommunism, that was later energized to mass political action by the women's and gay movements. "One thing I know about Protestant Christian fundamentalists from having been one, however, is that it cannot be substituted by 'spirituality.'...The system rests on quite simple assumptions: you have heard the word of god personally calling you; you have been 'born again' or 'saved'; you recognize that Jesus is the true son of god who died for your sins; the Bible is literally the truth, the word of god."[2] These churches all have complex mixtures of passion and patronage at their core—where traditionalist protection of the symbolic cultural status of straightness, whiteness, and maleness mixes with both genuine religious conviction and genuine religious-based social programs.

In his analysis of Kerry's ominous drubbing in rust-belt West Virginia, Mike Davis points out that local Democrats still won the governorship and two congressional seats in that state by equally large margins, partially because they pandered to social conservatism, but also because they crusaded vocally for government action to reduce unemployment and create high-wage jobs while the national Democratic Party did the opposite in supporting the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA) and the World Trade Organization (WTO). "I am inclined to believe that literal 'false consciousness'—embracing purely imaginary solidarities with one's exploiter or oppressor—is not common. I am not denying the existence of symbolic wages and imaginary demons, but the cultural war rages most fiercely when it is able to mobilize material self-interest, however ignorant or short-sighted." Davis continues,

The "latte liberal" libel—visceral blue-collar contempt for the urban knowledge-industry elites—is, after all, grounded in a real historic defeat, in actual humiliation. Male workers of all races, without college education, have suffered dramatic erosion of their wage-earning power and cultural status. With union halls shut down and the independent press extinct, it is not surprising that many poor white people search for answers in their churches or from demagogues on the radio. Or that they equate the decay of employment security with the decay of family values.[3]

This world of blue-collar religious conservatism is a mixture of real and perceived benefits, more akin to the concept of white-skin privilege than, say, a simple urban patronage machine.

Evangelical conservatism is no all-white backlash phenomenon, however. For the modern evangelical passions have their roots in the poor, multiracial early Pentecostal churches of southern California. Evangelical religion maintains an enormous presence in the spiritual life of African-American and Latino communities in the United States, and the Republican Party is making its electoral inroads into those communities through the pulpits. Not only did the Republican Party dominate among white working-class people this last election, it won a majority of Protestant Latino votes. And in Ohio, where the black, evangelical secretary of state campaigned vigorously for Bush (in blatant conflict with his election supervising duties) and megachurch pastors like Rod Parsley speak (hypocritically but convincingly) to multiracial congregations about challenging racial prejudice and promoting a black middle class, Bush won 14 percent of the state's black vote. This is not a relationship equivalent to that of white evangelicalism, of course; the grass-roots born-again Christianity that produces Chicago's Kanye West or LA's Tommy the Clown bears little connection to the bigoted zealotry of Tom Delay and James Dobson. But the Republicans are increasing their electoral showings in communities of color almost exclusively through socially conservative evangelical religion, and continued success could give them permanent majority-party supremacy—a fact they lustfully comprehend.

This is exactly the intention of the Bush administration's office of faith-based initiatives, a promise to direct eight billion dollars to religious social service groups. Anecdotal evidence indicates that the money is largely being funneled to evangelical churches in African-American and Latino communities that badly need the services. Two examples from Philadelphia give a sense of the breadth of this little-noticed repositioning of Republican theocracy: In one *New York Times* article, the Baptist minister Rev. Luis Cortes was featured parlaying a friendship with President Bush into several million dollars in federal grants for a youth employment program, housing counseling, and AIDS education. His growing network of Republican-funded social service programs now encompasses Latino communities in half a dozen poor cities. The article noted,

For a glimpse of one of the political currents running through the program, consider the after-school effort run by Mr. Castro, where a group of schoolchildren recently convened for what might be described as a Pentecostal poetry slam...."President Bush is Christian," said Sade Melendez, 10, after a recent rehearsal. "He doesn't believe in abortion, and the other man does." "John Kerry believes in lesbians," said Jorge Granados, 10. "He said if the baby was in the stomach, you could kill the baby," said Krystalie Ocasio, 9. "He stinks," Sade said.[4]



ABOVE: The Youngstown Sheet & Tube Company in the 1920s-30s, when the city was one of the world's largest steel-producing centers

Meanwhile, a mile east in North Philadelphia, the Bush administration has used millions of dollars in federal aid to court the "praying tailback," Rev. Herb Lusk, a former Philadelphia Eagles running back turned preacher at Greater Exodus Baptist Church. Lusk heads People for People, Inc., a church-based social-services empire that has broken ranks with the mostly Democratic Philadelphia black clergy to support Bush, claiming his bottom line is halting gay marriage. Beyond mobilizing election-day support for the president (in another rust-belt swing state), Lusk has also given Bush political cover for his treacherous abandonment of the Global AIDS Fund by hosting Bush to speak on AIDS at Greater Exodus. Such a location and betrayal are particularly ironic in Philadelphia, since it was largely African-American mass protests on global AIDS led by ACT-UP Philadelphia, working with existing HIV/AIDS services and drug recovery houses, that helped win the creation of the global fund in the first place. The effective, progressive and socially activist network of AIDS programs and addiction-recovery centers that united in these protests, however, starve for funds while well-connected gay-bashing tailbacks build fiefdoms next door.

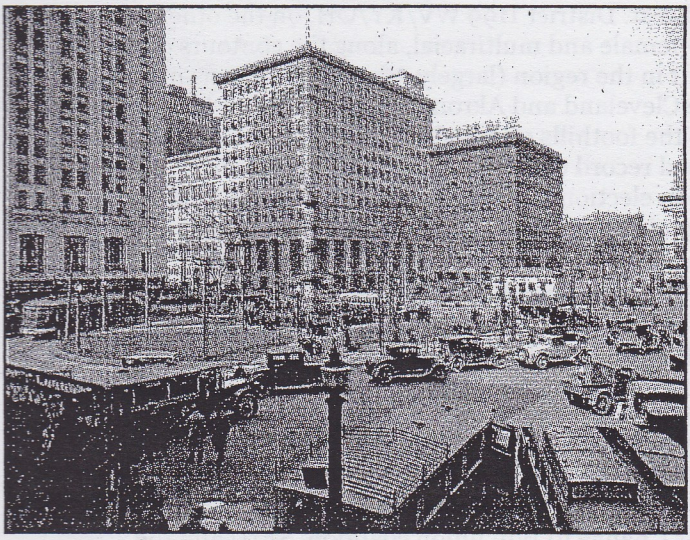
This is the geography of religion, homophobia, and money—an inextricable Gordian knot of political power not just in Thomas Frank's

Kansas, but also spreading from the blue-collar suburbs and prosperous exurbs of places like Ohio to poorer African-American and Latino neighborhoods of cities like Philadelphia. These are the deindustrialized swing states; places where Republican dominance could mean that party's control of the presidency for decades. The left has all but abandoned these places where the factories closed and unions died. Here in the rust belt, a right-wing network of churches and businesses offers exactly what the CIO once did: *both* short-term material gains for members and a militantly transformative vision of the world. Their vision is reactionary and fundamentalist, of course, but it remains in every sense a comprehensive moral judgment on a crass, decadent twenty-first century America. As former union activist and current evangelical crusader Phil Burress said in closing to the *New York Times* (in language that might have come right from an old CIO militant): "our movement is not concerned necessarily with Republicans or Democrats; people who are in positions with those parties do what they do because it serves their self-interest. Our movement will be something more, to change this world with our moral vision."[5]

Thus a trip to the dying industrial cities and vapid sprawl suburbs of Ohio can bring America face-to-face with the answer to so many liberals' plaintive, hung-over question last November third: "Who are these people?" Snapshots of those who likely voted for Bush, against their interests, and tragically paid the ultimate price for the madman's ambitions can be found in the brief obituaries the *New York Times* published in an article about the Marines of the Third Battalion. "Lance Cpl. Eric J. Bernholz, 23, was a devoted member of the Grove City Church of the Nazarene, and poured his energy into acting in its plays and coaching church youth sports. He graduated from Grove City High School and sometimes talked of wanting to be a firefighter."[6] Grove City is a blue-collar suburb of Cleveland, largely populated by folks like retired steelworkers—in a municipal area that lays off, not hires, firefighters. Another obituary spends a sentence recounting a life from a small town south of Columbus continually menaced by the possible closure of the paper mill that supports the local economy: "Lance Cpl. Aaron H. Reed, 21, a long distance runner on cross-country and track teams, was the president of class of '01 at Southeastern High School in Chillicothe, where job opportunities are few and the military is a popular option. He has a brother serving in Afghanistan."

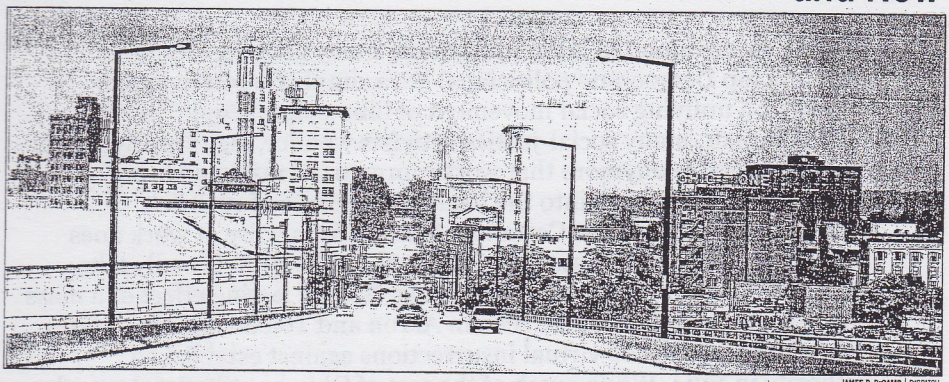
This is the 51 percent of voting America that will not be swayed from the Republican far right (back to a center-right Democratic Party?) merely by a different "framing" of issues. Indeed, the activists of both the left and the Democratic Party have seemed equally befuddled since Bush's reelection, as well they should be. If the answer is not as simple as a different "messaging" or more blog-organizing, it is also not just another teach-in or protest in another college town or chic progressive ghetto. If the political loyalties of ordinary Ohioans were to be flung against the power structure in a progressive movement, it would likely only happen the only way it ever has happened in the state's history—by

a reinvigorated labor movement at the grassroots. The mass growth of unions not only organizes the membership of a social movement, it also begins to redistribute resources and power from the top down. In places like Ohio, the only feasible short-term economic gains for most people lie in unionizing the state's remaining industries (those that physically cannot leave and are unlikely to shut down)—just as the only feasible long-term prospects for a revitalized left in the exurbs and church turf is in the workplaces that still bind people together. Fortunately, for this article seeks not to dwell in cynical pessimism, Ohio is home to some of the most unnoticed, but exciting, grassroots labor organizing in the country.



Then

Youngstown: Downtown, and Now



JAMES D. DeCAMP | DISPATCH

The city's downtown is undergoing a revival of sorts. "It's important that we not look like the poster child for the Rust Belt," said Reid Dulberger, of the Youngstown-Warren Regional Chamber.

Two unions that offer some hope in Ohio are the Toledo-based Farm Labor Organizing Committee (FLOC, which represent some 6,000 farm workers in northwest Ohio and southeast Michigan) and the Columbus-headquartered Ohio District 1199 of SEIU (which encompasses some 25,000 health care and social service workers in Ohio, West Virginia, and Appalachian Kentucky). These unions have had little-noticed but important organizing breakthroughs in recent years—in different, and key, working-class demographics. FLOC's farm-worker membership base consists almost entirely of immigrants from Latin America, and the union's successes are a rare foothold to greater economic and political power for the culturally invisible army of Latino proletarians who increasingly do the farm work, meatpacking, and construction labor in the Midwest. District 1199 WV/KY/OH, on the other hand, is overwhelmingly female and multiracial, along the contours of health care employment in the region (largely African Americans in battered urban cores like Cleveland and Akron; and blue-collar whites from the steel suburbs to the foothills of Appalachia). District 1199 in particular has an unmatched record of new organizing in Ohio, winning almost all of the many union elections it files for and devoting more of its resources to organizing (some 50 percent) than almost any other union.

Both 1199 and FLOC are extending their Ohio gains outward from the state. FLOC, after waging a campaign against Mt. Olive Pickle Company for years, recently won a landmark organizing victory over them in North Carolina for 9,000 workers (which marks the single biggest collective bargaining victory ever in that Southern, right-to-work state). District 1199 WV/KY/OH, while sticking to its three-state region for organizing, has become a "flagship local" for SEIU nationally as that union attempts to gear its entire structure towards such an organizing focus. In the new Change to Win union coalition, SEIU and the similarly-focused UNITE-HERE are now reshaping union organizing entirely to rebuild union density before it drops to zero, and it is bypassing the AFL-CIO (and it's slavish devotion to the Democratic Party) to do so. Such extensions of success outwards from Ohio to new terrain follow what must be labor's path to rebuild power: consolidate strength in those regions and industries currently possible, in order to later take on the juggernauts of Wal-Mart and the non-union South.

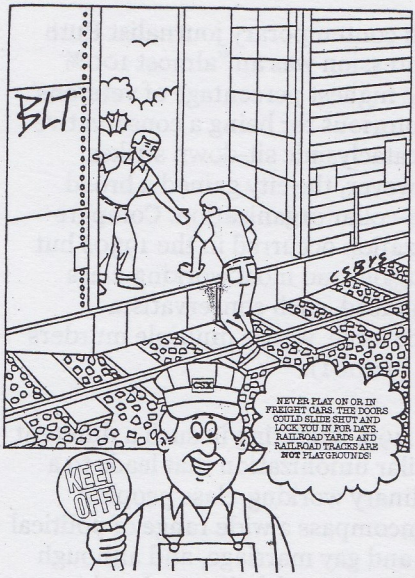
Despite a reinvigorated labor movement, many progressives (and certainly top Democratic politicians) have simply forgotten about unions as a unifying social movement of blue-collar people. In such a post-labor left, many social-justice activists wonder, legitimately, if it is even conceivable anymore that worker organizations could bring progressive values back into the hearts and homes of rust-belt evangelical communities. Certainly, fighting for a voice at work does not automatically imply an organizational challenge to broadly felt anxieties about abortion or homophobia. But the lasting effect of a mass fight for unionization can be seen in Akron and Toledo, the two Ohio cities that experienced virtual insurrections against established authority in 1934. While much of the rest of Ohio has tilted rightward with the times, those cities have remained overwhelmingly progressive

and Democratic. Indeed, Akron, which contemporary journalist Ruth McKinney noted during the Great Depression was an "almost 100% native-born white city...with one of the highest percentage of veterans' organizations in the country,"4 was notorious for being a conservative Republican town prior to 1934. After cataclysmic sit-down strikes against the rubber-factory tyrants, however, the city gained a broad swath of institutional progressive blue-collar organization. Compare this to Cincinnati, where some unionization occurred in the 1930s but certainly no transformative social struggle, and most working-class white people today vote Republican (indeed, such conservatism supports an out-of-control racist police force, whose multiple murders in the black community sparked riots in 2001).

But can unions today, like FLOC and 1199, operating in such a different political context, possibly pull off similar unionization that leads to a mass changing of loyalties among ordinary working-class people? Indeed, these unions' memberships encompass a wide range of political viewpoints about issues like abortion and gay marriage, and although they both certainly marshaled large majorities of their memberships to oppose Bush in 2004, it is debatable if many of those members also supported the initiative against same-sex marriage or Bush's Iraq war. Any changing of consciousness will only happen through hard work and patience, individual by individual, in the communities and workplaces where different kinds of people are brought together by the material conditions of their life. But to close on an optimistic note, 1199 took two important votes at a statewide delegates' assembly two years ago. The delegates assembly is made up of shop-floor representatives of each workplace—the grass-roots leaders of small groups, usually the people who carry union drives through management threats and firings with their personal bravery and integrity. The delegates' assembly, meeting to oversee the continuing organizing work of the union, voted by a large majority to oppose the war in Iraq. They also voted—narrowly, after passionate debate by both sides—to support the right to same-sex marriage.

Notes

1. Barbara Ehrenreich, "The Faith Factor," *The Nation*, November 29, 2004.
2. Roxanne Dunbar-Ortiz, "Being a Protestant Fundamentalist," http://mrzine.monthlyreview.org/dunbarortiz110805.html.
3. 3. Mike Davis, unpublished manuscript, undated.
4. 4. Jason Deparle, "Hispanic Group Thrives on Faith and Federal Aid," *New York Times*, May 3, 2005.
5. 5. James Dao, "Flush with Victory, Grass-roots Crusader against Same-Sex Marriage Thinks Big," *New York Times*, November 26, 2004.
6. 6. John Kifner, "Death Visits a Marine Unit, Once Called Lucky," *New York Times*, August 7, 2005.



AWFUL Eric

Eric didn't know it at the time, but I really did admire him. The problem is we live in a sick and twisted day. The way we express ourselves is never forthright. Disassociated from any way to live naturally, we never know the way we should. We invent petty games to keep ourselves amused, even if they appear to further drag each other down. Boredom will make you do ugly things. It's what we do. Civilization is anything but.

It all started when I graffitied the garbage can in his kitchen. He knew who it was because I used my name. my real one. Awful Eric, being a Graff writer himself, took offense. As an impingement upon his territory and an affront to the code of style with my very un-graff style approach to tagging. He condemned my utter lack of artistry, my conscious effort to be as sloppy and plain as possible, my yaehoo fuck you to their rules. I held in contempt his conformity to the canon of acceptable stylistic forms based in the graff scene. Thus commenced a tagging war across the city, crossing out each other's graffiti and leaving lewd comments behind whenever we came across it. Hurling venomous insults at each other through paint pens, etching devices and spray paint cans. The architecture of the Student Ghetto was our battlefield, our canvas. He etched his name under the down tube of my bike without me knowing for weeks. I retaliated and did the same to his expensive custom touring bike, twice. He took unexpected offense to this. Things became personal and of course escalated into new genres.

Antagonism is a fine art. Don't let anyone tell you otherwise. Pissing people off, especially your friends for the hell of it is a worthy recreation. What else have we to do with ourselves? It's also the best way to show affection.

"You hipster fuck!" I growl at Eric.

He's standing grinning at me on own my back porch wearing the blue zip up vest. Embroidered in white thread on the right breast is the CSX Intermodel logo. He's here for the show in the basement like everyone else. But unlike everyone else, he came dressed to up the ante.

"Yeah what are you gonna do about it?" he utters. "Yeah, that's what I thought." I can't even mouth a word.

"You can't wear that," I stammer. He's on my turf now and my confidence is buoyed by the fact.

You see, in the arbitrariness of cultural signifiers, Eric has transgressed one of my rules and he knows it. Coming from a background rooted in freighthopping, only those who ride the rails can don apparel advertising logos of train companies. Even worse, his choice of clothing for the night states "Intermodal" the bread and butter of modern-day tramps scamming free rides across the country.

"The hell if I can't. I write on those motherfuckers. I got every right that you got, trainhopper." he spits.

"Fuck you. Take it off and give it to me."

"Like hell."

"You ain't never ridden across the country on the back of one." Our ego battle is reaching new heights in such a public display.

"Sorry dude."

"Give it to me."

"Or what?"

"Or else."

"Or else what?" A disinterested crowd is beginning to take notice with confusion. Bret, our mutual friend, his BMX buddy, my writing cohort, steps in besides us.

"You all should fight for it...right now!" He blurts.

"I'm ready. I'll take you. I don't give a shit." Eric boasts. I adjust my footing with unease, thinking to myself. Eric I know is practiced various forms of martial arts and is more muscular than myself. This could get ugly.

"Uhh. Ok, fuck you." At a loss for words, I'm trying not to expose my apprehension. I'm drunk enough to not know what I am getting myself into. What a bunch of fucking *men* we are. What do I think I am doing?

"Let's go right now!"

"Yeah, I'll be the referee." Bret chimes in again. I think for a moment looking at his vest, hating this enemy of mine.

"Ok, Ok. But not right now. I'm not ready. I need to train."

Eric begins laughing hysterically. He knows I have no chance. I stick my hand out to seal the challenge and my enemy takes my hand, harshly. I just look at my feet. Ah, the things we do for lack of anything better to do with our lives.

I never get around to that training program. Every time he sees me through the summer and fall he throws down the challenge, making motions that resemble taking off his shirt. I decline every time, putting off the inevitable, claiming I need more training and mental preparedness, but I'm just stalling. At the pool party at Crane's parents' house I offer to have a go with him finally. He declines thankfully, I was drunk again, naked in the pool holding a plastic toy pony. It would have been a bad idea, ending in a watery death. Our "gentlemanly duel" would have to wait until the next winter.

March finally comes and there is another basement show at our house on 15th avenue. My friends from North Carolina, Piedmonster, are in town to play and I'm nursing a volatile mix of cheap vodka and Monster energy drink. After the haze of their smoke machine clears I'm feeling something of invincibility and go looking for Awful Eric. He's been waiting for so long and tonight is his night. I corner him on the deck by the back door.

"Alright shit bag, tonight is your night. Are you ready?

"I thought you'd never ask." He gleams.

"Well let's get Bret and get this over with." I spit, hollering out into the night for the referee.

We make our way onto the grass away from the crowd and Bret follows us uttering how he can't believe were actually going do this after so long. Eric takes off his coat and glasses and lays them by the fence with mine. Bret tries kicking out all of empty beer bottles out of the arena. The 15th house backyard has hosted 3 am gore-grind shows, rampaging dogs, overgrown tomato plants, fireworks battles but never a fight to the death over an article of clothing.

"So what are the rules going to be gentlemen?" Bret grins.

"Knock out or tap out." Eric responds confidently, bouncing on the balls of his feet.

"Now Eric, hold on, come on now. No, I don't want to do that. I don't want us to give each other black eyes and bloody noses. Somebody might get hurt."

"Why what's wrong with that?"

"I don't want to hurt you, you're my frie-"

Before I can finish the last syllable a dense fist becomes the premature period to my unfinished sentence. Bret laughs out. I guess I got no choice.

Though Eric has no qualms I can't bring myself to hit him like this. I realize that's silly after the litany of abuse that we have been inflicting upon each other for over a year now, but he is after all a friend and I can't bring myself to hit him. Awful Eric has no such reservations and swings again, connecting with my jaw. He isn't Awful for nothing.

I grapple with him and use my superior stature to force him to the ground. I have the length advantage and use my long legs tempered by bike commuting to pin him to the ground. Not knowing what to do next I use all my might to hold him there. I feel his muscles contract beneath me, some kind of untamed mustang bucking beneath me. I try to think of something fast. I slide my fingers around his throat and begin to squeeze. In my untested combatant logic and desire to be humane I figure if I can stop him from breathing, I'll force him to tap out without having either of us getting too fucked up. Logic is a funny thing isn't it?

Wild thoughts traverse my mind in a heightened state of adrenaline . The most present is that knowing Eric, the last thing he'd do is willingly give in to me and in his swollen pride would rather pass out than tap out. He knows what he is doing the whole time and I do not, having only been in fights either with my teammates on the baseball team or with my 16-year-old boss when I was a golf caddy. But that's a different story.

With my hands constricting his windpipe and not his hands anymore, he unleashes a series of blows to my head and nose, letting loose a torrent of blood. It drips into his grimacing face and short black hair. A nightmarish scene it must behold. A crowd begins to assemble a safe distance from us on the muddy March lawn. A vicious animalistic clash between seemingly friends. An eerie gray cloud emanates from the depths of the basement doorway giving our bout an air of Hollywood unreality. No doubt the result of Piedmonster's smoke machine they deployed during their set which filled the house minutes before. Eric and I grunt and contort, covered in blood in a homosocial display of pride. No one seems to care enough to break it up.

"What's going on?" A voice calls out.

"Ah, its okay," I hear Bret respond, "Its just a gentlemanly duel." Eric begins to laugh. My blood trickles into his smile and he gags,

"You're never going to beat me. Youre never going to get the vest." He continues to batter my now bruised cranium.

"Give up. Give up," I chant, "I got you pinned and you're losing breath.

"No you don't, you'll never strangle me. I got my neck braced on the ground and you'll never get your hands all the way around my neck. Until then you can't beat me."

He beats the sober right out of me. Adrenaline has flooded my bloodstream so much that I completely lose my drunk. I begin to tire and the pummeling is felt. I pray he hasn't broken my nose. My blood is splattered all over his t-shirt now. I start laughing.

"You motherfucker..."

He's right and it's a matter of time before I tire out, expending all my energy like a rodeo bull in the very first moments of the fight. I'd rather quit while atop then let him slowly wither me down and beat me into submission. I relent and jump off.

"That's it, I quit. Keep your fucking vest, I never wanted it in the first place." It's kinda true actually.

I pull him up off the wet mud of the battleground with my hand.

"You never had a chance." He gloats, gasping for air. His chest is heaving.

"Shut up. I don't care."

Aaron, the singer from the touring band, comes up blurting in astonishment,

"What the fuck is going on? Are you okay Brian?"

"It's alight," I reply feeling my tender nose. "Just a gentlemanly duel."

His mouth agape, everyone is staring in horror, not having an implication of a clue of what had just occurred. Up until now everyone thought I was a kind and peaceful man. A crimson river is flowing down my face and onto my own shirt. I decide it would be a good idea to go inside and change.

All I did was stoked his already inordinate ego. We discuss our strategies we used. Eric promises to instruct me in the ways of martial arts to the best of his knowledge. We plan on being sparring partners. I tell him he's a dick. He admits it's true. We hug and hang out and talk excitedly nursing new bruises like medals of honor. Everyone looks on even more confused than



ever. I've never felt closer to him. I think about the ancient Greeks and sport of boxing. How invigorating.

Eric was not a close friend at all, but one of those whom you value for being themselves, as morbid and abrasively honest as possible. You knew he wasn't going to coddle you. The last time I see him, at the beginning of the spring, I inform him how I plan on riding my bike across the country.

"To see the West Coast for the first time!" I exclaim, "The best way possible, to feel every mile in between." I am buoyed up by a new confidence. It's almost spring and I'm envisioning a new life as a bike tramp.

"You'll never make it dude," He laughs. "The prevailing headwinds will howl you down once you hit the plains. " Of course this is what he'd say in all his smugness. Eric is the type of human being that lives off of puncturing the dreams of others. I don't let him pin my balloon nor my bike tires.

"Shut up," I retort, "You bastard." For emphasis. Still secretly sore from the forfeiture of our "gentlemanly duel."

These are the last word I say to him. Four months later I see the Pacific Ocean for the first time in my life straddling my bicycle outside of Coos Bay, Oregon. The headwinds weren't half as bad as he made them out to be. Well, South Dakota was pretty bad.

"Where are you now Awful Eric to see this!" I scream triumphantly over the sand dunes devoid of vegetation from all the four-wheel riders. The tender egos of men are an amazing thing. How pitiful we must seem.

Upon returning back home a year later on my bike I am surprised to see there was a package waiting for me from Eric. I knew exactly what it is before opening it.

There are no goodbyes between us. I never get the chance to learn martial arts from him. I just can't feel right wearing that blue vest he wanted me to have. Our friendship was unlike any I've ever had. One with few nice words between. With spilt blood, bruised noses and staggering egos to make up for it. He lives in New York City and is an apprentice to a photographer he has admired since he was a teenager, a life long dream that fell into his lap. I'm living my dreams as well, I guess, still the half ass I never claimed to be. Still not knowing how to fight or live or do much of anything for myself for that matter. Not that it matters. One thing is certain though, when he reads this he will hate it and I will smile.

Check out his photography at www.AwfulEric.com

SORCHA





I've decided this winter isn't going to effect me. It's not going to affect her either. We're gonna continue doing all those summertime activities. No more succumbing to a seasonal disaffective disorder. No being bummed in our rooms and submitting to "winter" this time. It's all too easy underneath this assailing gloom. Another fact of life that covers Arawak City from November until April. This year is going to be different. I'm in love this year, for the first time.

After five years here I thought I had found all the secrets of the city. I thought there was no one to find here I would want to share the rest of them with. I am wrong in both assumptions and it is because of her. To understand the story of how I found the hidden pier you have to understand how I met Sorcha. You see, I would have never found it without her. We need to go back last summer to the Pizza Hole.

Sweating my life away and sometimes getting tips, on one side of me is an ancient iron oven, a thousand degrees Fahrenheit. On the other is a giant plate glass window magnifying the sun. I'm slinging pizzas at a glorified food court for white-collar workers

and I'm not alone. With me is the bad attitude crew. Somehow the employees of this food stall are mostly punks and I'm right in the middle. If not punk then just as good cause their attitude can rival any. Food service is shitty but it can be okay when you got people in it with you to laugh, joke, turn up the stereo, eat as much as possible, piss off customers, make voodoo dough versions of your boss, give away free food and steal from the register. There's a new hire, which is no uncommon occurrence. The turnover here is staggering. Though the owners try hiring only cute girls because they think they bring in business, she seems different. One of *us*. I peek to see her as she refills the soda coolers down on our end. A septum piercing and one of those "newsies" hats over her short hair. Yeah, she is definitely one of us. You can just tell sometimes. These signifiers miraculously work.

A couple days pass and I still haven't talked to her yet beyond the customary nods and hellos. Finally, she introduces herself while refilling the soda cooler again.

"I'm Sorcha," she grins, her voice thick with the nasal lake accent of her home, "from *Wiscansan.*"

I tell her I think she'll sit in just perfectly around here.

At the after party for the bicycle race that weekend I run into her again. She is wearing a green vintage dress with black bone jewelry in her ears. My co-worker isn't wearing her funny hat like every other day. Her short bleached hair is down in her eyes. I think she's cuter though all boyed in up dickeys and boots for work.

I'm dressed in drag. For no good reason but that I can. Green wig, bright red lipstick, slinky black dress and a 50-cent tiara. It's atrocious to behold. We get talking some, naturally being co-workers. She comments on my BNSF t-shirt I wore to work that week,

"So you ride those things too?" she asks, beginning to tell me all about riding freight around the country.

As I listen I keep thinking I have heard this particular story before. I don't understand how but it's so damn familiar. Getting caught by the bull who then buys them ice cream and lets them hang out in the yard office, ending in Richmond and going to the mall next to the trainyard. Combing my memory to recall where I had heard this before, it seizes me. I scream wildly,

"HOLY SHIT ASS!" I proclaim, bouncing up and down before her. She stares at me confused but in amusement.

"What's wrong with you."

"So I see you know Cricket then?" trying to calm down.

"What!?" Sorcha gasps.

"Yup." I glance, adjusting my tiara. "That is the same kid that taught me how to ride. I traveled with him for a year and he told me that same story. Can you believe the chances? We rode our first train with the same kid!"

Her eyes light up before me.

"I bet he tried to kiss you too."

"Maybe..." Her lips purse.

"He always does."

She turns away, trying to conceal what I already know and then flashes back around.

"Yeah, I thought so," I shrug dejectedly. "He never tried to kiss me."

With this our friendship commences, revealing an odd but intimate detail linking us together, the ubiquitous and sketchy Cricket. Instantly a connection like that of a long lost family member takes hold. Its novelty takes many a week to wear off as we work side by side making pizzas and sandwiches for Nationwide Insurance accountants, suburban football dads and the knitting convention goers.

The weeks go by as I harbor a crush unspoken. Always pessimistic about my attractions and romantic desires, I do nothing but dream about her. Not until the beginning of winter do I realize she had been looking at me differently the whole time. Do you know what I mean? Eyes can say much more than mouths. Always the romantic at heart, one night standing on my porch she is waiting for me to kiss her. I just smile knowing where things are leading.

"I want to show you something special. It's a place Sorcha."

I had yet to kiss her and I want to do something to knock her off her feet. You only get one chance to do a lot of things, might as well make it something to remember. These things are all we got and we might as well do them right.

Wet snow flakes land on our hands a few days later as we climb the old water tower by the train tracks with a thermos of hot cider in my bag. I share with her a long held secret up there without words.

The reason I like Sorcha is because she makes me forget there are things called seasons. She's the excuse to brave the cold and hit the streets. Zooming around the bike path downtown late at night, we are looking for a place to drink a 40 by the river. Something catches her eye.

"Wait stop, we have to pull over!" she yells. "What's that down there?"

Sorcha points to a path leading down under the River Confluence Restaurant. An establishment on the river that this asphalt strip has taken me past maybe a hundred times.

We dismount and walk our bikes down a dirt path to what looks like a pier. Underneath concrete and steel supports of the restaurant is a dry dock stocked with all manner of boats. Off the edge is a floating strucure meant to launch said boats off. We sniff around surveying the little secret we've stumbled upon.

"I can't believe this is here," I confess. "I've rode past here too many times to remember never thinking to look down here."

"Look over there Brian!" she blurts, snapping her fingers, pointing to a metal boat hanging in the I-beams.

"Those canoes, they aren't even tied up." I begin to laugh. It echoing across the Scioto.

She grabs me, pushing her face to mine, kissing me, putting an end to my laughter. I look at her with a mischievous twinkle in my eye. She knows exactly what I am thinking. Sorcha was thinking it all along.

"But we need paddles, don't we?"

I look out over the darkness of the water, the night sky cold and moonless. There is a series of old metal train bridges spanning the water. It's the perfect of hidden spots, the best yet of Arawak City.

"We can get those later, honey. I don't think this place is going anywhere."

We sit on the I-beams drinking the 40 oz, watching the breath in front of our eyes through our conversation. It lasts through the night. In the distance rises the downtown skyline, reflected in the river. This city may suck but we got each other's company now. We make plans to navigate it in a commandeered boat. Junk trains rumble over the bridges contrasting the sterile gleam of the city. The next week I search every thrift store for a pair of old oars. With the discovery of the hidden pier I know there is going to be something different about this short lived romantic interlude.

Sitting with Nate, an out of town friend, at the North Market, it's my day off. Were playing chess on the balcony. Eating three dollar ice cream cones from Jeni's and making plans to ride bicycles to the West Coast in the Spring.

"You know Brian, when I found out that Sorcha was living in Columbus of all places, with a boyfriend and going to art school here, I just couldn't believe it." Nate moves his bishop, licking his treat, getting it into his handlebar mustache.

Nate lives in a small town to the south. He met her years ago when they both lived different lives. Yeah, they rode trains together and probably kissed.

"I mean it's like...WHAT?! How could this be the same person?" I'm putting the moves on Nate, on the chessboard of course.

"She's a wildcard. I know." I reply.

Nate summed it up most eloquently. As soon as he discovered what had become of Sorcha, now living oh so close to where he had ended up, her wildcard status came to the fore. Breaking up with her boyfriend, dropping out of art school, switching jobs, smooching me, and making new plans to resume the life of travel. She's an oblivion seeker like me, incontent with the routines and expectations life has to offer. It's why I like her. If life were a game of poker I'd always win with her in my hand.

Nate goes back home and Sorcha returns from a spring jaunt to New Orleans. The deadline of our romantic interlude is no longer an abstraction but something looming in the horizon. It has a date and I had made it. The winter's ability to mystify time is no more. The first days of Spring in Arawak City coincide with her return. I realize all the secrets of the city I need to share before it's too late. Cryptically as possible I call her on the phone to tell her my agenda.

"There are things I must show you before it is too late," I declare. "I cannot tell you now but soon you will know them."

She knows what I am up to. In the next week I take her to the quarry, the waterfall, the spring wildflower forest and others I won't betray. Most importantly, we make it back to the hidden pier.

"Look at these beauties!"

Standing in my room at the 15th house, I hold out two contraptions scuttled from crap I found in my basement. None could be located anywhere so I took matters into my own hands.

"Uhh, ha ha, Ok." She takes the metal crutches wrapped in duct tape with cardboard cut specifically to push a stolen boat through water.

"Let's go." I nod. Diamonds and chocolate ain't shit compared to this.

I stuff the monstrosities as far into my bag as they'll go. Slinging the whole mess onto my back, we peddle the night, making a line for a certain stash of OSU rowing team vessels left dubiously unlocked.

Upon relocating our secret, we discover only one is unlocked. There is a suspicious aperture located in its hull but I don't say a thing. I row her out with my makeshift flippers. I take out a bottle of whiskey, Jameson, the finest. She begins to sing. Our voyage is one that would rival even Rimbaud's poetic imagination. At least for the first two minutes it is.

"Uhh, Brian, why is there all this water in this boat?" she laughs nervously. "My feet seem to be getting soggy."

"Yeah, there's this hole right here," I point, "But it's ok. Boats have these things sometimes. To help balance the load, you know." It's an obvious lie and she knows it.

"To help balance the load?"

"Yeah, I think.." She glares at me unconvinced, "I'm sorry, I just made that up."

Sorcha begins scooping out the river water with her hands. Our asses are getting wet. She begins to laugh,

"This is real sweet but I think we ought to go back...Unless you feel like swimming tonight." Kissing me on the cheek.

The cardboard comes off one of the oars, lost to the depths of the Scioto, I'm forced to use my arms to make it to shore.

Despite how perfect this moment is, my mind is somewhere else. It's a problem that I have, thinking about, of all things, the Husker Du album I listened to before our date. "Something I learned today, black and white is always grey," sings Bob Mould in the first seconds of the first side of Zen Arcade.

Life is a state of perpetual contradictions and this affair is one of them. Our boat filling with water not wanting to go back to land. Being scared to think I'm falling in love, leaving her, wanting her more, being even more terrified at its implications and then feeling neglected by her making plans to leave even though I'm doing the same. Plans that would make sure I would never be able to come back to her. Permanence is a lie I know. But I know to revel in all this mess, the sweet and dreadful impermanence, the beauty of confusion, is to be most alive. I'm just a hypocrite you see. A hypocrite that doesn't want to be in love but can't help it.

Biology tells us we are growing and dying simultaneously. Forced to navigate the contradictions, there is no black and white reality. Truth is colorless. It's grey and grey is the most vibrant color we will ever behold.

By the time we make it back to shore I don't know how we're even still afloat. Unable to get the half-sunk deathtrap onto the dock, we tie its rope around a rock and hope for the best. Sorcha

and I scurry away laughing and dripping, hand in hand. I get a feeling this lonely boat was left unlocked for a reason. We don't leave a note.

Sorcha is moving on, wanderlust in heart, not sure what she wants. Just like me. I still don't understand to this day how we both just walked away. No doubt the wildcard I imagined her to be, I don't let myself feel anger, not even sorrow at her leaving when I was just the same. Yet, as I sit with her on our secret pier again one last time, watching our rowboat continue to fill with water, there's nothing I can do but curse reality and love her more.

Not long after she sets off for New Orleans again to learn trombone from street players. I embark on my bike that will take me to the shores of the Pacific Ocean for the first time. Leaving my cradle called Arawak City promising never to come back. Not knowing where we'd go from there or meet again.

Sorcha and I never had the privilege to experience the warm of spring together, the clichés of romantic ambiance. By the time the Magnolia's are blooming around the student ghetto we aren't there to see them. Following distant phone calls and internal rumbling, we both set out for something greater than what we could teach each other. Our romantic interlude is a not a distant memory. I still remember how she felt. The sensation may fade as our paths draw us farther apart but I never forget.

The day comes and I have a horrible case of poison ivy on my face. It's not even summer yet. She still kisses me goodbye. Now that must truly mean something.

Sorcha sleeping peacefully in my bed. Not wanting to wake her, I don't say goodbye in the morning. I ride out possibly forever but not before leaving a note.

"Don't let circumstance be the reason we cross paths again, we control the direction our legs take us in life."

When I tell my friends about it later, unable to keep anything a secret, everyone knew about the hidden pier. But as far as Sorcha and I float, it was ours alone. Something within tells me she will be in my arms again. It won't be very long and it won't be for very long.



"The world trying to tell you something, Brian, that you're making the right decisions," Says Ellen.

I rub my brow. It's unseasonably warm here for December. We are sitting in the cluttered kitchen of the Chauncy Warehouse, 2229 Bloomington Ave., in its last days before eviction.

"You think this thing that we live in, our environment, can do something like that?"

"Why else would everything be working out like it is? When things work out like this, it's just as much your ability to realize it's happening as it is them actually happening." Cryptic her words seems, but somehow they make sense. Her brown eyes look up at me for the first time. "You've been paying attention..."

This morning I made it to Minneapolis, not knowing how I would get myself, my 60 pound backpack or my bike waiting for me in some unknown garage to my next destination. It had been stolen months earlier, but somehow showed back up in the West Bank, which was no uncommon occurrence the Hard Times collective member told me at the time of its disappearance. By evening an automobile had been entrusted to me to be driven exactly where I needed to go next. Home.

I've never given much thought to divine intervention but this year was full of bum luck, almost too miraculous to be coincidental. If there is some kind of universal consciousness to grant favor or hurl misfortune, it wanted to see me through. But why me? I never prayed to any gods or believed in karma. In fact, I've spent most of my life scoffing at these metaphysical notions holding in contempt those who fill their lives with them. So many deserve providence more than I, but here I am again thinking perhaps a road is something more than asphalt and concrete.

In a day I learn to drive a stick and I'm off. It's the first tangible thing I have learned in a long time. Maybe all year, perhaps years. Science proves that something evolves only if it's forced to. Something indeed is forcing me back to the heart of it all. Every cell of my being is telling me to go back there and this is it.

The myth of Minneapolis was exactly that. Something that I had built up in my head through pen pal letters, touring bands and glory only a night's visit can impart. Minneapolis is just like everywhere else really, only better. But better is not what I need. Without my little piece of the world, my boredom, my aspiration, my frustration, my dumb friends I'd made silent pacts with without their knowing, I'd lose something of myself. Us Midwesterners never say what we really feel but they'd know soon enough. That little piece, that sense of self, is something that not many have. Six generations of inertia is hard to run away from. Life is more than just a search for perfection. It's a midnight stroll where you see your vision unfold into reality. Things you got to say and do and see through. It's a promise you make to yourself to not lose what is really you, even if you never chose what exactly that is. High Street's cracked sidewalks and the feet on top are calling a 1000 miles away.

Fourteen hours later without rest and many intersections stalled out in I understand why humans created the song. In a car with no radio and no passengers I damn well near taught myself how to sing. At 1026 Timber Trail just in time for Christmas, a plate of homemade buckeyes are waiting for me and the person that probably knows me best. I tell her everything that had come my way in the past year. I am just 2 hours away to where I really want to sing songs of,

"I know why all these things have been happening to you Brian," My mom smartly folds her hands. "I know exactly why..."

"Oh yeah?" I smile wryly, popping one of the chocolate covered peanut butter treats into my mouth.

"It's all those prayers that I've been saying for you everyday son."

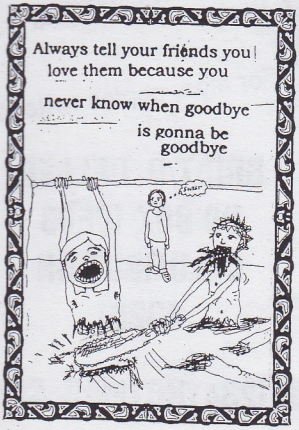
I begin coughing up my holiday candy up, Geraldine begins laughing. I think it is the closest she has ever came to convincing me to believe in God again.

I shove off a few days later to deliver the car to its owner. In another sparkling twist of fate the Jetta belongs to none other than an old basketball buddy of mine from Columbus. He had done the beet harvest that summer in Minnesota and left his car with new friends he met there to go travelling. Who are Justin's

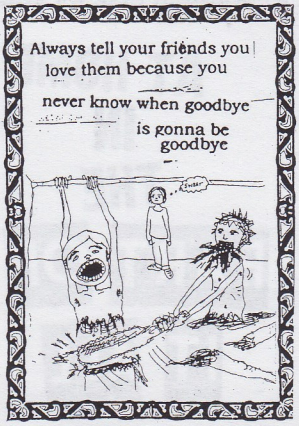
friends? None other than my own and it all comes together. Now carless I find my old house and the key in the mailbox. Everybody is at work so I take a walk down *the street* to see who I can find. Within an hour I have a new place to live and free leftovers of my favorite food, Yau's fried sesame tofu in my hand, from one of my oldest friends in town. Ellen's predictions continue to be true. I'm working on new songs that I should have written years ago.

A month into it I'm restarting where I left off. A friend finds me to tell me Justin, whose car I had serendipitously driven back, is dead. He killed himself in his parent's bathroom a week after I gave him his keys back. No one saw it coming, not even his friends. After I handed him his keys two weeks prior, I had promised sometime to hang out with him. It never happened. I said "goodbye" and it really was. I never knew him well but I know my friends and family well. How close could any of us be and no one would ever know? Why in loss do we realize what is most important and not in the moments that bring us most joy? I never talk about Justin's passing to anyone.

Not everything is fine in Ohio but more than ever it is where I know I'm needed. I'm getting back to my glorious anxiety once again. It's how I know I'm finally home. I'm not the only one who can't sleep well, who hates everything they see. There's solace in it. I think about Ellen's words, "It's just as much your attention as it actually happening." It's the truest thing anyone ever said to me all year. I searched all over this country for something better. The farther I got the more I knew I was looking in the wrong place. Who are your songs for? You could be the reason but never know it that we make it through until tomorrow. So pay good attention. What are you living for?

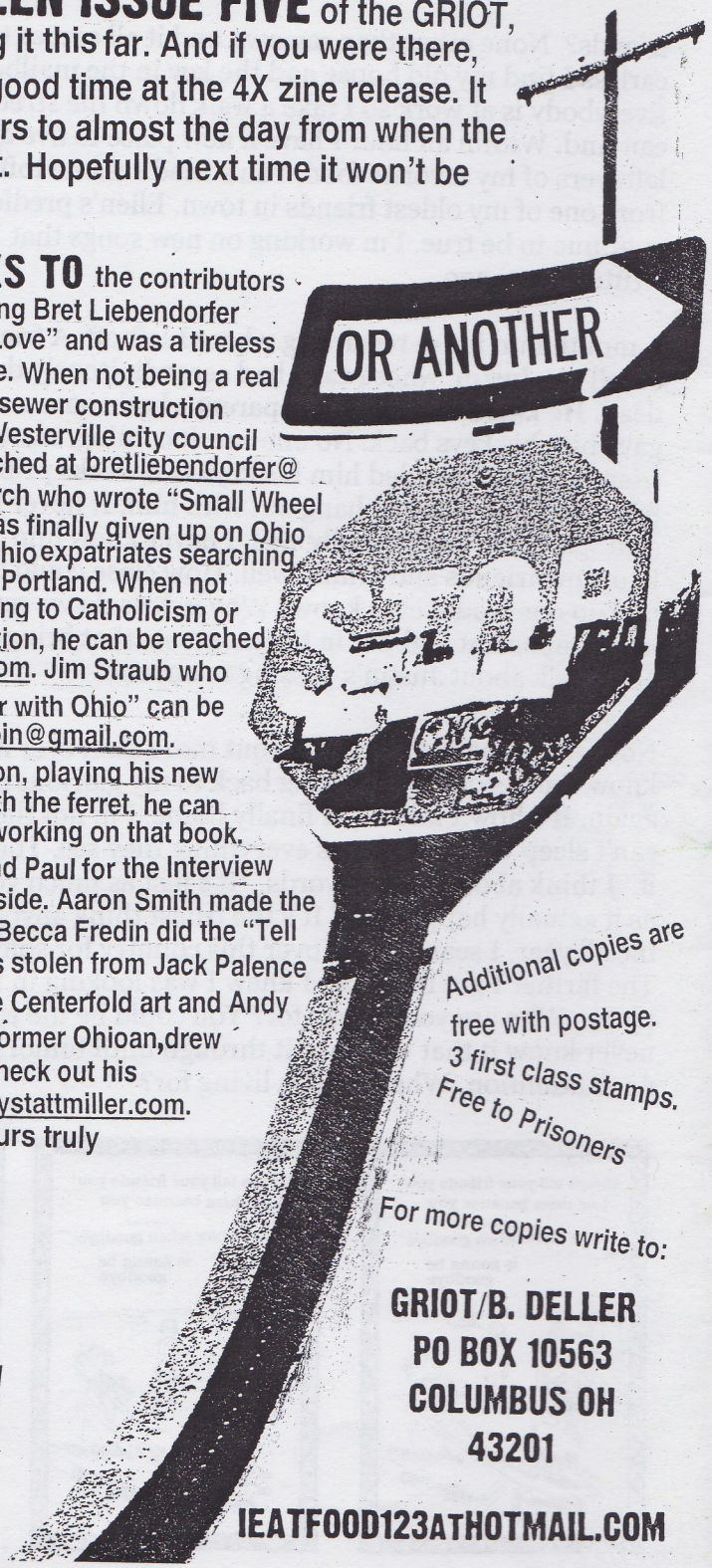






THIS HAS BEEN ISSUE FIVE of the GRIOT, thanks for making it this far. And if you were there, hope you had a good time at the 4X zine release. It has been two years to almost the day from when the last one came out. Hopefully next time it won't be so long.

SPECIAL THANKS TO the contributors this time around including Bret Liebendorfer who wrote "Prank Call Love" and was a tireless copy editor for this issue. When not being a real journalist writing about sewer construction unding debates at the Westerville city council meetings he can be reached at bretliebendorfer@ mail.com. Trent Upchurch who wrote "Small Wheel at the Genomics Lab" has finally given up on Ohio and joined the herd of Ohio expatriates searching for IT jobs on Craigslist Portland. When not break-dancing, converting to Catholicism or writing experimental fiction, he can be reached at tsupchurch@gmail.com. Jim Straub who wrote "What's the Matter with Ohio" can be reached at rustbeltjacobin@gmail.com. When not cooking bacon, playing his new XBOX 360 or playing with the ferret, he can probably still be found working on that book. Thanks to Tony, Wes and Paul for the Interview and my moles on the inside. Aaron Smith made the "Caffeination" artwork. Becca Fredin did the "Tell your friends" art, words stolen from Jack Palence Band. Max Caldwell, the Centerfold art and Andy Statmiller, yet another former Ohioan,drew the cover illustration. Check out his website http://www.andystattmiller.com. Everything else by yours truly



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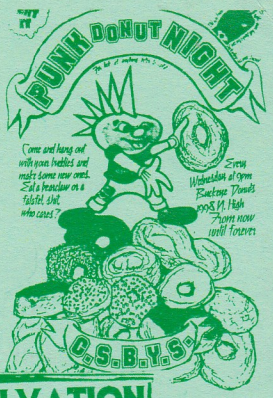
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